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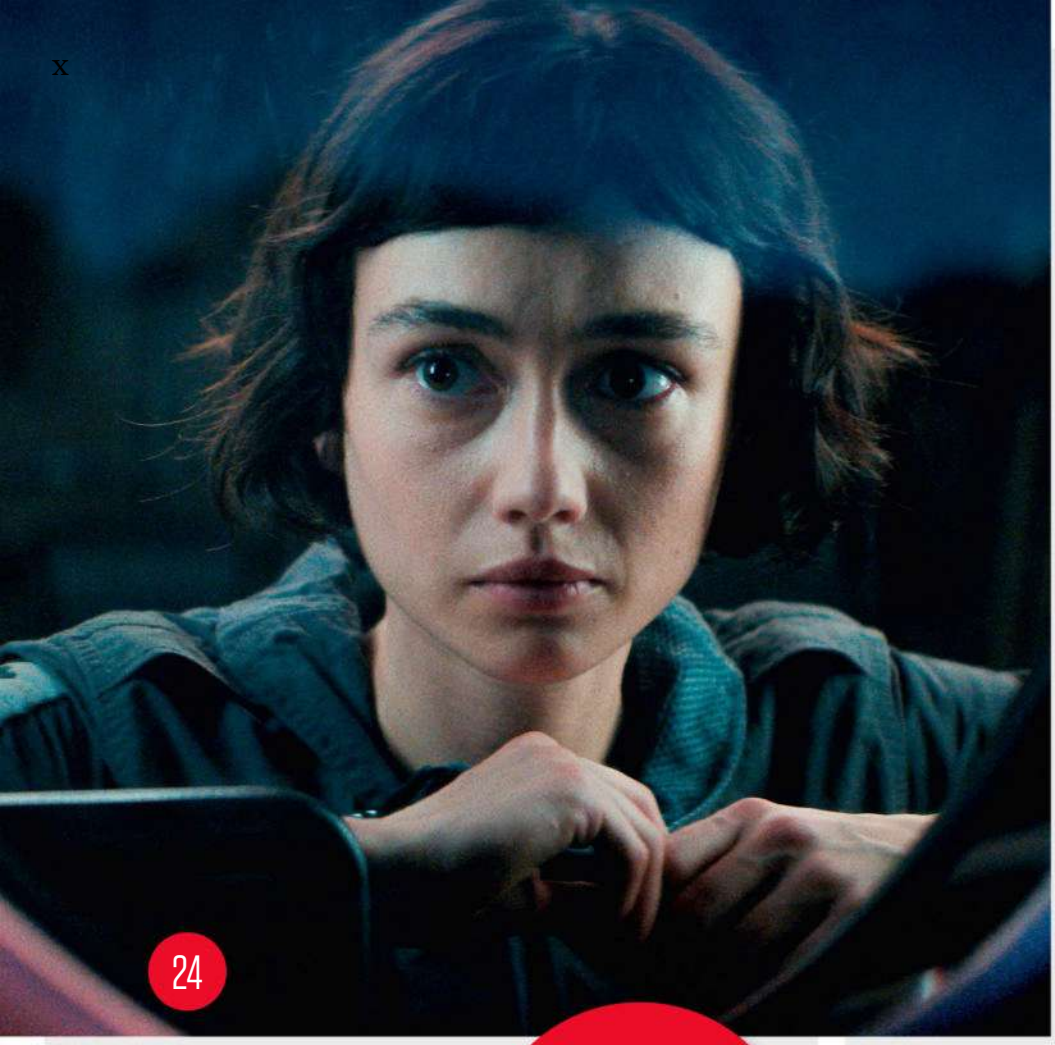

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Captain's Log

Flying to LA to watch the first episode of *Alien: Earth* and chat with creator/writer Noah Hawley wasn't on the list of things I was expecting to do in 2025 – especially so shortly after doing the same trip to chat all things *Predator* with Dan Trachtenberg – but if that's the way this year wants to roll, then keep it coming.

I've said it often, but what a golden age we're living in for geeks. Although Hawley does point out that it's not their intention to pursue a Marvel-style "Universe", isn't it great that it really feels like *Alien* and *Predator* are really *back*? Not only that, but in the hands of people who love the franchises.

While I've enjoyed, to varying degrees, every iteration of both in the past, these new steps truly do feel next level. I absolutely can't wait to see where *Alien: Earth* takes us, and I'm even more excited that it's planned as a multi-season show. Now, if they could just dig that unseen anime series out of the archive...

Speaking of archives, we've dug into ours to bring you even *more* previously unpublished *Stranger Things* goodness as we begin the countdown to season five. We go all the way back to the beginning in this issue, with more to come – and a few surprises – over the coming months... Enjoy!

Darren
X

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IMAGES: 20TH CENTURY STUDIOS, COLUMBIA PICTURES

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ *The Toxic Avenger* was so much more fun than I'd expected.

→ Loved *28 Years Later* – I didn't expect to be moved by it. Fascinated by the poem "Boots" becoming a horror anthem over 100 years later.

RANTS

→ Even if you don't like the current iteration of your favourite film/show/comic, isn't it great that it's still active and not left on a shelf somewhere?

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Watching Hammer's first two *Quatermass* movies has given me a hunger for more Nigel Kneale. Time to rewatch the ITV show starring John Mills!

RANTS

→ I'm going to Paris in October. Naturally my first concern was looking up the location of the doors of Count Scarlioni's chateau. Turns out they're still not back in situ after being removed while the building's restored. Bah.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Getting through as many movie versions of *A Christmas Carol* as possible has become an annual tradition, so very excited for Robert Eggers's take. Will it have Muppets, though?

→ Looking forward to seeing Rick Moranis back on our screens, but bemused that *Spaceballs* is what's brought him back. Ever heard of *Ghostbusters*, Rick?

→ The *2000 AD Sci-Fi Special* cover is a thing of beauty!

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RAVES

→ So it's Denis Villeneuve to direct the next Bond, then. Not my first choice – loved *Blade Runner 2049*, while *Dune* left me cold – but I'm certainly intrigued to see how a talent like this tackles 007.

RIP

→ Sad to hear of Peter David's passing. His *Incredible Hulk* run was a must-read for me in the '90s. Great *Trek* comics too.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Who knew the summer's most pervasive argument against AI would be *M3GAN 2.0*?

→ The sleeper sci-fi show of the summer is Syfy's *Revival*. Melanie Scrofano is leading a great cast tackling an undead storyline like a mystery/thriller. Good stuff.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

AUGUST 2025

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FAMILY TIES

Prequel time travel romantasy in *Outlander: Blood Of My Blood*

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TOGETHER
Escape the rat race! Watch out for that mysterious body-changing force, though.

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THE BANISHED
More horror in the great wide open. When will these people ever learn just to stay at home?

20
BIRTHRITE
Not another person leaving the city and encountering folk horror! There's a message here, people.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Joined At The Hip

Married actors Dave Franco and Alison Brie play out the midlife couple fears of director Michael Shanks in **Together**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Millie (Alison Brie) and Tim (Dave Franco) dig deep.

AS A JOURNEYMAN ARTIST IN Australia, Michael Shanks has made a living as a jack of all trades, able to compose, create visual effects, edit, write screenplays and direct short films. As unpredictable as his professional life has been, his personal life with his partner of 16 years, and within his long-term circle of friends, has been incredibly stable.

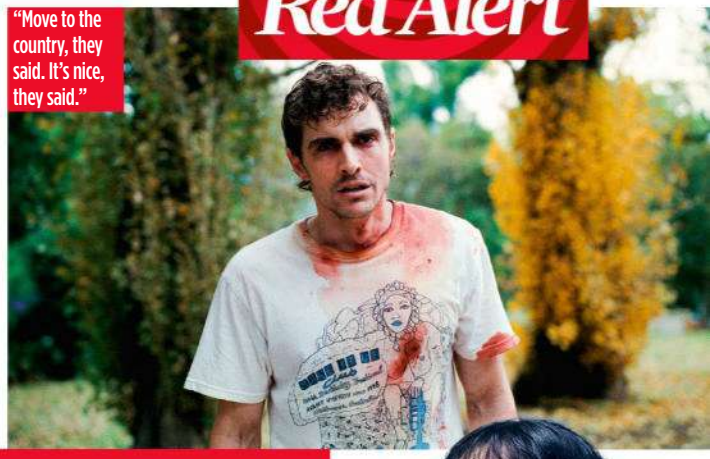
Shanks tells Red Alert that dichotomy got him thinking about what permanence does to some couples over time, and why they choose to stay together. "Seeing people who have been together for a long time, maybe they were together because they were used to each other more so than they were still in love," Shanks says. "To me, that was something really, *really* scary, the idea of being trapped with your other half just out of convenience. When you realise that you live in the same house, you breathe the same air, you eat the same food, you have the same friends and really are just sharing a life."

While happy in his own life, his screenwriting brain took those thoughts to the nth degree and turned it into his first feature film, *Together*. It looks at the long-term relationship of musician Tim (Dave Franco) and teacher Millie (Alison Brie). After a recent move to the country, they find themselves at odds with one another as they're forced to examine their life in this more isolated setting. Shanks says Tim is very much based on his own life as an artist. "I'm approaching my mid-thirties after some projects have gone and some projects have gone away," he says.

> **"I kind of realised that this is a story about a relationship and it could be a body horror too"**

"We all have that friend who is trying to support this impossible dream, and in my life it's usually men that are still holding on to this

"So you'll load the dishwasher right next time, yes?"



"Move to the country, they said. It's nice, they said."

And this is why you don't mess about with Super Glue.

stuff as they get older. Then I was looking at the women in my friendship group, and even some of the men in my group, who have these beautiful, outward-looking jobs," he continues.

"So if Tim was going to have these very inward goals, like, 'I'm going to be famous, I'm going to be a musician,' then it stood as a good counterpoint that Millie's character would be somebody who would look outward.

"She wants to be generous with her time and attention to children, and raise other people rather than focusing so much on herself."

Shanks says he not only wanted to crank up the existential tension points between Tim and Millie but also make them tactile and physical.

"When I had the idea, I kind of realised all in one that this is a story about a relationship and it could be a body horror too, so let's go as far as we can with that," he says of *Together*'s visceral approach to this couple's attachment. (If you've seen the trailer, you'll know it features moments where the couple's bodies appear to start to fuse together...)

"I kind of have a philosophy when it comes to filmmaking, which is that I really like set-pieces and I really like making the most of a genre," he explains. "To me, you can only do the story once. I love body horror, and I don't know that I'll ever get to make the genre again, so I was like, 'Let's squeeze every bit of juice out of this!'"

In that vein, Franco and Brie – who are married in real life – are very much put through their paces in portraying this couple. Shanks says their work as producers and actors was integral to going as far as he wanted in playing out the themes so fiercely.

"I don't think we could have done it with a cast that wasn't in a relationship and was intimate with each other," Shanks says of the pair. "They add such a physical and emotional intimacy to the performances by just having that history. But also, there were days on set where they had to be physically connected. They were so close for so much of the film that had there been any awkwardness or any hesitation between them, we just wouldn't have been able to get it done in time.

"It's surreal. They joked early on that doing this film, they were either going to divorce, or they were going to become more co-dependent than ever. I'm happy to report that they are not divorced."

The film made quite an impression at this year's Sundance Film Festival, and Shanks hopes broader audiences will appreciate the film's earnest heart, despite some gnarly visuals. "This is a film that's really made for an audience in terms of how far we push the body horror," he says.

"I push it as far as I can because I love being a little prankster. But the central relationship and the love between those two characters really carries them on. It's a scary time, but it's a good time."

Writer/director Michael Shanks (left) on the set.

Together is in cinemas from 15 August.

SCI-FACT! ***Together*** **has 170 visual effects shots; 130 were created by Shanks because there was no budget to get them done otherwise.**

SCI-FACT! **The first classic "red shirts" to die were two security officers, Matthews and Rayburn, in "What Are Little Girls Made Of?"**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Canon Fodder

Star Trek's forgotten heroes shine in IDW's new **Red Shirts** miniseries

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Variant cover art for issue one, by Declan Shalvey.

STOCK CHARACTERS WHO ARE killed off shortly after first appearing, *Star Trek*'s red shirts take centre stage in IDW's new five-parter, giving identities and voices to the anonymous crew members.

"The series was inspired by my reference to some red shirt deaths in *The Original Series* episode 'The Changeling', where NOMAD vapourises two red shirt officers on the Enterprise," says Christopher Cantwell, who previously wrote monthly title *Star Trek: Defiant*. "I tried to find their names for my reference but couldn't, and a super *Trek* fan actually reached out to me and told me the correct names.

"I thought it was cool how someone would remember their names for so many years. The idea of red shirts being people is nothing new, but in *Trek* it's seemed more of a joke and a body count tally, so I wanted to put faces and names to the shirts."

The series is set on the snowy planet Arkonia, where the crew of the USS Warren face a battle against time to prevent spies stealing precious Starfleet intelligence. "The red shirts aren't told everything," teases Cantwell. "There's lots of secrets at play and things get much worse very fast."

Due to "the high attrition rate", Cantwell created 12 red shirts, including Stellar Cartographer Zayna Road, Chief Security Officer Midge DeMatrio, Security Officer Webster

Cover art for Issue one, by Chris Shehan.

Cromarty and newbie Chip Miller. "It's hard to get to know them so quickly in distilled comic pages, so we created a roster that introduces you to each member," continues Cantwell. "But those members get X-ed out as the story progresses. The story is framed between the young recruits, namely through the eyes of Chip, the most fresh-faced red shirt, who has only been on one other away mission where he almost died, and the senior red shirts, Web and Midge. They're the oldest red shirts out there and have that veteran crust."

There's a high mortality rate, but humour helps alleviate the blood and gore. "I had to find the right balance, but also make the deaths really matter," explains Cantwell. "They run the gamut as some are shocking and sudden, some are heroic, and some are just collateral damage to larger things at play. I also set the red shirts up as salty, so there's a bit of EC

> **"The story is framed between the young recruits, namely through the eyes of Chip"**

Comics war book vibe going on – the excellent things Harvey Kurtzman did with *Frontline Combat* and *Two-Fisted Tales*."

With the red shirts being "a signature icon of *The Original Series*", artist Megan Levens brings a distinctive '60s feel to her designs. "The hairstyles are period, and a few characters even wear skirts and high boots," says Cantwell. "We're also tweaking it, so there's also women in pants [trousers] uniforms, suggesting a preference.

"Aliens from *Enterprise* also appear, building off their continuity," he adds. "The book is set in 2266, right at the start of Kirk's five-year mission. Importantly it precedes the episode 'Balance Of Terror', and there are also character connections to *Star Trek: Defiant*. I do have plans for a couple of characters to show up in potential future *Trek* projects..."

Star Trek: Red Shirts is out on 16 July.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Join Space Fleet! See the world! Get killed!

Dark Meta

Black Mirror comes to comics with the launch of the *USS Callister* graphic novel

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER BECOMING THE FIRST episode to spawn a sequel in this year's "Into Infinity", USS Callister is now going where no *Black Mirror* episode has gone before, as it's being turned into a graphic novel by independent British publisher Twisted Comics. Preceded by the recent Free Comic Book Day issue, showcasing their work-in-progress of series three's "San Junipero", the adaptation by Twisted Comics' Neil Gibson and artist Silvano Beltramo – who drew *Doctor Who* spin-off *Paradise Towers* for Cutaway Comics – arrives on Kickstarter this month.

"I'm inherently geeky and so I used data to decide which episodes to adapt," explains Gibson. "I went around the top review sites that ranked *Black Mirror* episodes and did a box plot diagram to see which episodes were most universally loved – and 'USS Callister' and 'San Junipero' came out on top. We had planned to put 'San Junipero' out first but for various reasons, including there being a follow-up to 'USS Callister' recently being released, we swapped the order around."

With Charlie Brooker having drawn inspiration for *Black Mirror* from similarly standalone series such as *Tharg's Future Shocks* and *The Twilight Zone*, Gibson is exploring the inherent differences between the comic book and television media. "Comics can be less dramatic than TV because you haven't got sound effects and music," he explains. "But then you can guide the reader more by changing the size of the panel and repeating panels to make things stand out – and you also get to add splash pages, which add a lot of drama."

Another unique element to comics is the lettering. "With fonts, you can convey real emotion, just by how they and the speech bubbles are drawn," he continues. "For 'USS Callister', we used the *Star Trek* font that was used in the '70s comics, but we chose to put all the characters in lower case, except for Captain Daly who has all caps because he is in control and more powerful.

"Then when Daly is in the real world, we have everyone using the standard all caps, only Daly's size is slightly smaller than everyone else's. He literally has the smallest voice in the world."

Beltramo has come up with a mock Space Fleet comic book cover, and channels some classic art styles. "An interesting thing about the TV episode is that when it first starts and we see the 'in-game' characters, there's a filter on the screen and black lines down the side, suggesting it was filmed before widescreen TV," says Gibson.

"The next time we see the 'in-game' characters, the black lines have gone and so has the filter, so it looks more modern, but it still has a nostalgic look to it. So for the comics, we recreated that old look from the '60s by using Jack Kirby-style art. When we go back for the second time, we used Neal Adams-style art with more shadow work and Ben Day dots to make it look more '70s. The comics are full of these little touches, which we use to honour the story."

The Official Black Mirror Graphic Novel: USS Callister launches 22 July.

SCI-FACT! **Kirsten Dunst has a fleeting cameo in "USS Callister", as an employee in the Callister Inc office.**

Henry (Jeremy Irvine) and Julia (Hermione Corfield).

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Time After Time

Outlander keeps the time travel mythology going with a new prequel series

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

PRODUCTION ON *Outlander*, Starz' hit TV adaptation of author Diana Gabaldon's 10-book series of the same name, was completed in September 2024. That means the eighth and final season airing in 2026 will finish the epic love story of late-1700s Highland soldier Jamie Fraser (Sam Heughan) and his time-travelling wife Claire (Caitríona Balfe), originally from Second World War-era Scotland.

But showrunner Matthew B Roberts has had another ace up his sleeve going back to season five, when he first pitched Gabaldon a prequel series, *Outlander: Blood Of My Blood*, which she approved. Roberts's idea was to play out the love story – referenced in the books – of Jamie's parents, Ellen MacKenzie (Harriet Slater) and Brian Fraser (Jamie Roy), and reveal the more mysterious love story of Claire's parents circa the First World War, Julia Moriston (Hermione Corfield) and Henry Beauchamp (Jeremy Irvine).

While it was officially greenlit by Starz in 2022, the network, Roberts and Gabaldon managed to withhold the details, keeping things under wraps until the official trailer was released in early July. The assumption in the books and series, that Claire's parents died in a car accident when she was five years old, has covered up the truth that they were actually time travellers using mystical standing stones.

Roberts tells Red Alert that when he was trying to come up with a prequel, he was drawn to two characters Gabaldon had never been that interested in fleshing out in her books, Julia and Henry. As he thought about their non-existent backstories, it struck him that if time travel in *Outlander* is a hereditary ability, then why shouldn't they be the source of Claire's capabilities?

"Then I just posed the question, 'What if they didn't die in the car crash?'" Roberts says. "That's where the prequel really took off in everybody's mind. A magical thing about *Outlander* is time travel, as that's the thing that is weaved throughout all the episodes and all the books. Even when Claire comes back in the books and she stays [in the past], there's still much more time travel with the other family members."

> **"I said, 'Just listen... what if they didn't die in a car crash?'"**

Roberts also knew that he needed more stakes and conflict than just the linear love story of Ellen and Brian. "I'm like, 'Well, I can build a limited season series off that, but I can't build multiple seasons,'" he says. 'So I was sitting in my office, alone, racking my brain. Oddly enough, there was a scene in *Outlander* that was being written at the time, and Claire mentions that she didn't really know her mother.

"I found [executive producer] Maril Davis and I said, 'Just listen to me... what if they didn't die in a car crash? What if they lived and went through time?' Her eyes

Members of the MacKenzie clan in all their finery.

Brian (Jamie Roy) and Ellen (Harriet Slater). Aww.

lifted up, and I was like, 'Good! I got it.' Then I wrote the story of them going back in time to Scotland and that's what sold the show. We all imagined the same thing which is, 'Wow, this is two epic love stories. Not just one.'"

Roberts worked on the pilot and series outline, and consulted with Gabaldon for her assessment. "I knew all the places I wanted to go, so it was easy to pitch Diana where I wanted to go with the characters," he explains. "When I first pitched her Henry and Julia, she was on board 100% right off the bat."

In fact, Gabaldon wrote season one's penultimate episode, and co-wrote the finale with Roberts. "She was well aware of where we were going the whole time," he says of the prequel arc. "It wasn't like I was checking in with her to go, 'Can I go this way, or can I go that way?'

"She knew where I wanted to go from the beginning, and she was fine because in her mind, the books and the show are two different things. I know a lot of the audience sometimes doesn't think that, but she does, and we do too."

Roberts says what sets apart *Blood Of My Blood* from the original series is the fact that it's much more focused on the family dynamics of the Fraser and MacKenzie clans prior to the Jacobite rebellion. "You're not only getting the pull from the outside world, but you're getting the love/hate relationships within the family dynamic itself," he explains. That includes seeing younger versions of *Outlander* characters like Colum and Dougal MacKenzie, or Murtagh Fitzgibbons Fraser.

Blood Of My Blood has already been renewed for a second season, and Roberts says he's got lots of story to explore in the past. That includes the five unseen years in the First World War that will define Henry and Julia's coming together, which he hopes fans will love: "We know that this world is going to be true to the *Outlander* essence too."

Outlander: Blood Of My Blood is on Starz from 8 August and MGM+ in the UK from 9 August.

Henry and Julia certainly know how to strike a pose.

SCI-FACT! **Harriet Slater previously appeared in *Indiana Jones And The Dial Of Destiny* and *Pennyworth*.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Can you feel the Schwartz? Rick Moranis and Bill Pullman returning for Mel Brooks's **Spaceballs** sequel.

→ Jon Bernthal to reprise the Punisher in **Spider-Man: Brand New Day**.

→ Russell Crowe is Henry Cavill's mentor in the **Highlander** reboot.

→ DC Studios supremo James Gunn says **Sgt Rock** movie is still moving forward.

→ *Nosferatu*'s Robert Eggers to adapt Dickens's **A Christmas Carol**.

→ Mia Goth joining Ryan Gosling in Shawn Levy's **Star Wars: Starfighter**.

→ *Elemental*'s Peter Sohn helming **The Incredibles 3**.

→ Blumhouse to adapt multiplayer horror game **Phasmophobia**.

→ Ben Stiller rumoured to be directing another big-screen take on **The Twilight Zone**.

→ *Anora*'s Mikey Madison replaces Sydney Sweeney in **The Masque Of The Red Death**.

→ Tom Rhys Harries takes the title role in **Clayface** from DC Studios.

→ **Marvel** adding a mystery fourth release to its 2028 schedule, on 15 December. Human Fly, your time may finally have come!

STEFANIE KEENAN/GETTY IMAGES FOR LACMA

SCI-FACT! **The King of the Monsters is also currently facing DC's finest in *Justice League Vs Godzilla vs Kong 2*.**

Cover art for the second issue, by Mark Brooks.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Kaiju Crisis

The King of the Monsters vs Earth's Mightiest Heroes in **Godzilla Destroys The Marvel Universe**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER THE recent one-shots pitting him against individual characters or teams, the King of the Monsters now faces off against literally all of Marvel's numerous heroes and villains in a kaiju-sized event series. While the past encounters were set in different time periods, *Godzilla Destroys The Marvel Universe* takes place in the present day.

"We made the decision to look at the Marvel Universe from orbit and we wanted to make sure that even casual or new readers could pick this book up and be immediately immersed," explains writer Gerry Duggan, who previously journeyed back to the '70s for *Godzilla Vs Hulk*. "So we've driven past some of the finer points of modern continuity in favour of a more 'evergreen' characterisation of our heroes and villains.

"That's a very different starting point than my *Hulk* one-shot, which planted the flag firmly in the Bronze Age of the Marvel Universe and played with some characters that we haven't seen for a while, such as Dr Demonicus. That particular issue subverted the 'vs' that was in the title – because I was already working on this miniseries and I was saving one of the most exciting fights I've ever written for Marvel.

"I may never top the fight between Hulk and Godzilla – except for the upcoming sequence that I can't believe Marvel and [Godzilla owners] Toho approved for Wolverine. This is not a title you can be timid about!"

Godzilla Destroys The Marvel Universe is a five-parter, and Duggan says that it was a challenge encompassing Marvel's infinite ranks within the limited page count. "One really fun beat involves a lot of the villains in issue two, and I don't want to spoil it but it made me laugh!" he teases. "Some of my favourites only get a couple of panels but I hope they all shine.

"There's a beating heart to this story and it's in Godzilla's chest but it's also in Marvel's First Family, as one of my favourite pieces of this story is that we did a pretty clever deed to show you the cost of what happens if the heroes fail to stop Godzilla."

Opening in New York, the action also reaches some of the most obscure corners of the Marvel Universe. "This title lives up to its name, as Godzilla really is going to destroy the entire Marvel universe!" says Duggan. "We begin in Manhattan because that's such an important location in the Marvel Universe, but we're going to some unexpected places in our second and third acts. The X-Men will face off against the big guy in Madripoor, and Wakanda will throw down a vibranium gauntlet to the big lizard."

Duggan is full of praise for illustrator Javier Garron. "Few artists have as many gears as he's flashing," he says. "He can bring the pain, the laughs, and especially the action. There's a sequence in issue one that stars Quicksilver and it's a really special sequence that only Javi could make shine. In truth, the series should be called *Godzilla And Javier Garron Destroy The Marvel Universe*!"

Godzilla Destroys The Marvel Universe is out on 16 July.

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

> "We are excited to introduce a whole new batch of creatures"

At a panel for the Annecy film festival in June, showrunner Eric Robles gave more details about the upcoming animated series *Stranger Things: Tales From '85*.

The show will be set "in the stark winter of 1985", between seasons two and three of the main show, and will feature the original characters. They will be joined by Nikki Baxter, a tough girl with a mohawk, "fighting new monsters and unravelling a paranormal mystery terrorising their town."

The Duffer Brothers, Hilary Leavitt, Shawn Levy and Dan Cohen all serve as executive producers, while the imagery is brought to life by animation studio Flying Bark.

The show will feature new monsters, tied to Hawkins Lab: "When Hawkins Labs' science meets Upside Down matter, that creates a recipe for a whole new breed of business. And they're up to no good," Robles told the audience. "From Demogorgons to Minotaurs, the creatures of *Stranger Things* have become stars. And we are now excited to introduce a whole new batch of creatures to the *Stranger Things* universe." Imagery shown – and not yet available to the public – included an "Upside Down pumpkin zombie", a "toothy snow shark" and "human Upside Down vine hybrids".

Inspiration for the series comes from classic '80s cartoons, but particularly *The Real Ghostbusters*, which was a "North Star" for shaping the show.

Tales From '85 is due to premiere in 2026.

Maya Hawke (Robin) has been cast as Wiress in *The Hunger Games: Sunrise On The Reaping*.

A new *Stranger Things* novel, *One Way Or Another*, will be released in December.

"Nancy Wheeler and Robin Buckley must expose the corruptive forces sinking their claws into a desperate Hawkins", we're told.

We Are Fanatik has new items available to pre-order, adding to its extensive range of collectables. Alongside playing cards and a collector's set of pin badges they will release a limited edition ingot and a Hawkins Yearbook coin album. Visit wearefanattik.com.

Stranger Things: The First Shadow picked up several awards at the Tony Awards on Sunday 8 June. The winners were: Paul Arditti, for best sound design of a play, Jon Clark for best lighting design and Miriam Buether and 59 for best scenic design.

Nike will once again partner with *Stranger Things*, releasing two colours in the Nike Dunk Low *Stranger Things* range this holiday season: Phantom/Midnight Navy and Black/Speed Red.

Hawkins National Laboratory, aka the Georgia Mental Health Institute, is currently being demolished following completion of season five. It follows locations for Hawkins High School and Hawkins Radio Station also recently being knocked down.

Netflix House, a new immersive experience, is opening in locations at Philadelphia, Dallas (2025) and Las Vegas (2027). Featuring themed walk-through opportunities, as well as food and merchandise, various shows will be represented.

Stranger Things: Escape The Dark will be housed at the Dallas location, where guests will "journey into the ruins of Hawkins to find three missing townspeople... before the horrors lurking within find you." Join the waiting list for admission at netflixhouse.com.

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

PICTURES: NETFLIX

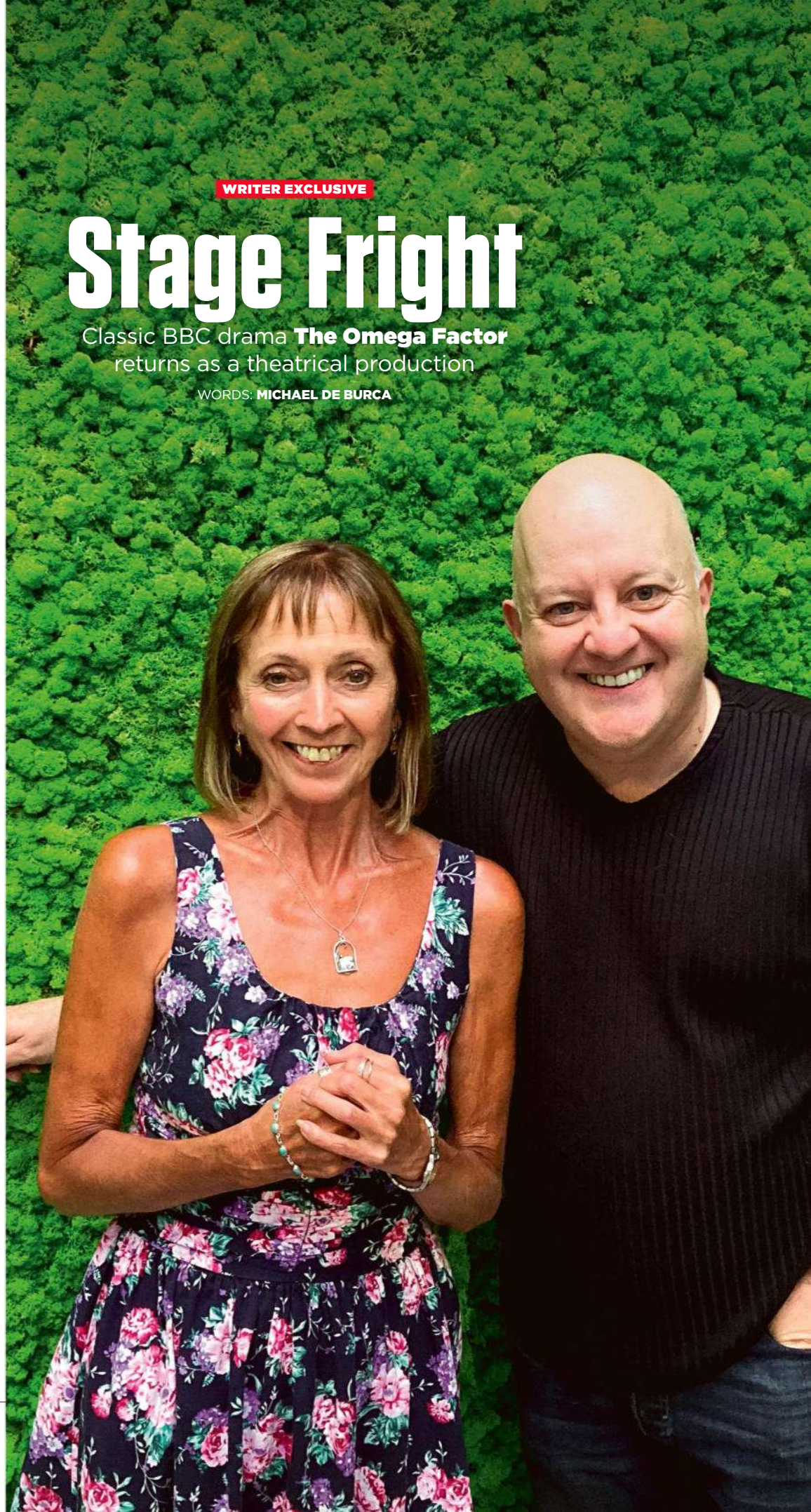
SCI-FACT! **Flying Bark did animation work on the *What If...?* series and *Rise Of The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Stage Fright

Classic BBC drama **The Omega Factor** returns as a theatrical production

WORDS: **MICHAEL DE BURCA**



EDWARD DREXEL: a name that sent shivers of fear down the spines of viewers when BBC's Scotland's chilling paranormal thriller *The Omega Factor* first appeared on television screens in 1979.

Starring Louise Jameson, fresh from her stint as companion Leela on *Doctor Who*, and the late James Hazeldine, *The Omega Factor* introduced viewers to journalist Tom Crane, a man with latent psychic powers who finds himself recruited to secret government organisation Department 7, led by physicist Dr Anne Reynolds. Joining Department 7's fight to defeat powerful rogue psychic Edward Drexel, played with suave malevolence by the late Cyril Luckham, Crane and Reynolds investigated a host of unexplained supernatural phenomena.

As the neverending battle between good and evil raged across 10 episodes, terrifying viewers, the dark nature of the programme quickly caught the attention of Mary Whitehouse, the reactionary founder of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, who had questions raised in the House of Commons about the show's moral compass. A planned second series was quietly axed.

Now, 46 years on, it's set to make its stage debut with the world premiere of *The Omega Factor: By The Pricking Of My Thumbs*, by Natasha Gerson and Liam Rudden, at the Edinburgh Fringe this August.

The immersive play invites audiences to join the cast of a radio recording of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* at the mystical Rosslyn Chapel, where they will soon discover they are pawns in a chilling battle for their souls.

GHOST WATCH

If the name of co-writer Natasha Gerson is familiar to fans of *The Omega Factor*, which has since enjoyed spin-off novels and four audio series produced by Big Finish Productions, it should be – she's the daughter of Jack Gerson, the show's creator.

She also played the character of Drexel's assistant Morag on television, a role she reprised on audio between 2015 and 2023.

PICTURES: LRMEDIA, BBC, BIG FINISH

Is it easier or harder to learn lines you've written?

Gerson as Morag in the original series.

Co-writers Natasha Gerson and Liam Rudden.

Revealing the origins of the stage production, Gerson says, "The idea was born shortly after my co-writer Liam Rudden interviewed me for the launch of my second *Omega Factor* audiobook [2021's *Immaculate Possessions*]. We discovered we had much in common, including a taste for the supernatural.

"Emails and ideas were tossed back and forth over the course of about a year, and thanks to Liam's work and encouragement it began to take shape," she continues. "I believe my Dad would have been thrilled. We all wanted to do a second series, but it never happened. I know that my Dad was very disappointed by that."

While many were unhappy that *The Omega Factor* had disappeared from the schedules, some of the crew may have been secretly relieved by the programme's cancellation, however.

One director recalled strange physical phenomena while filming an episode that featured psychokinesis – allegedly, objects moved of their own accord as those on the set watched in amazement.

Another, meanwhile, told of a dark figure who appeared in the viewfinder of his camera while filming late one night in a graveyard; when he looked up, there was no one there. A short time later, a large tombstone crashed to the ground injuring one of the crew, causing filming to be abandoned for the night.

Gerson too had her own frightening experience in the studio one evening. She recalls, "There was certainly some strangeness on the set. In one studio scene I did, Morag was lurking at the top of a staircase in a haunted building. I stood there for a long time between takes as there had been some technical problems that day – at one point all the clocks in the studio had stopped at exactly the same time as the lights flickered and died.

"Suddenly, I was strongly aware of a presence standing behind me. I felt a slight radiation of warmth and assumed it was one of my co-actors. However, when I did turn around to whisper to them,

> **"There was some strangeness on the set"**

there was no one there. There couldn't be, the rest of the staircase didn't exist, immediately behind me was a drop to the studio floor – but I had definitely felt a presence. It was very spooky."

As she prepares to return to the role of Morag, Gerson admits that so determined was she to be in her father's drama, she had applied for the role using a pseudonym. She confesses, "I pretended to be someone else to avoid any sniff of nepotism."

With a smile, she adds "*The Omega Factor* was fuelled by our shared addiction to movies like *Night Of The Demon*, *The Haunting Of Hill House* and even *The Devil Rides Out*. I can't wait to bring it to the stage for the first time in this new two-act play."

The Omega Factor: By The Pricking Of My Thumbs runs for five nights from 19-23 August, at Braw Theatres @ Grand Lodge, 96 George Street, Edinburgh. Visit edfringe.com.

SCI-FACT! **Jack Gerson gave Natasha a copy of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* for her tenth birthday.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

BORJA B. HOJAS/GETTY

- Boldly going... **Star Trek: Strange New Worlds** to conclude with a six-episode fifth season.
- BBC creating an animated **Doctor Who** series for pre-school channel Cbeebies.
- T'Nia Miller to star opposite Paul Bettany in Marvel's **Vision** series.
- Netflix looking to revive Sid and Marty Krofft's '70s series **Land Of The Lost**.
- *Curse Of Chucky*'s Summer Howell is **Carrie** in Mike Flanagan's TV adaptation of the Stephen King novel. Katee Sackhoff, Matthew Lillard and Heather Graham are also set to star.
- DC Studios to make **Mister Miracle** as an animated series, showrun by comics writer Tom King.
- Kaitlyn Dever's Abby to lead the third season of **The Last Of Us**.
- 2026's animated spin-off **Stranger Things: Tales From '85** to be set between seasons two and three of the live-action show (see page 13 for more).
- Devin Kessler, Cameron Scoggins and Gwendolyn Sundstrom joining *Friday The 13th* prequel series **Crystal Lake**. Thursday the 12th?

SCI-FACT! ***Speed Racer*** **creator Tatsuo Yoshida was partly inspired by** ***Goldfinger*** **and the Elvis Presley film** ***Viva Las Vegas*****.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

The GoGoGo Team

The race is on for **Speed Racer** in Mad Cave's new comic series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

JUST AS HE DID WITH HANNA-Barbera's *Space Ghost* and *Captain Planet* for Dynamite Entertainment, writer David Pepose is bringing a contemporary edge to Mad Cave Studio's new *Speed Racer* series. Pitching it as "*Rocky* in a race car," he is reinventing rather than rebooting Tatsuo Yoshida's classic 1966 manga (known in Japan as *MachGoGoGo*), later adapted as an anime by Tatsunoko Production.

"We're establishing a brand new continuity specifically told through a modern lens," Pepose tells Red Alert. "So while we're drawing on plenty of continuity from the original cartoon, we're also putting our own unique twist on these characters, as well as injecting different strains of pop culture DNA into the mix."

While the Wachowskis' 2008 live action *Speed Racer* film is another touchstone, Pepose's influences range from *Days Of Thunder* to *Grand Turismo*, *The Fast And The Furious* and *Baby Driver*. "The Formula X League has its own heightened elements that incorporate the various gadgets of the Mach 5, as well as differentiating from traditional NASCAR or Formula One," he explains.

"As far as the thrill of the race is concerned, that's a core part of the series – Speed's stakes are very personal, but he's ultimately out there chasing his dreams, doing the thing that he was put on this planet to do."

Describing him as "a deeply fascinating character", Pepose imbues Speed with

One of the variant covers, by Nicoletta Baldari.

some Shakespearean qualities. "He's a creature of passion, so there's a lot of emotion rolling beneath the surface," he continues. "He really strikes me as like Hamlet, a dramatic figure whose capacity for romance and brooding is unmatched. Following Speed on his hero's journey is such a treat, because you'll see him bounce off his supporting cast and learn and grow as a competitor and as a human being as a result."

Speed Racer's supporting cast includes his father Pop Racer, his live-streamer young brother Spritle and race car team owner and potential love interest Trixie Treadwell. "She serves as the Carol Ferris to Speed's Hal Jordan," says Pepose. Meanwhile, the mysterious Racer X not only stars in his own "more noirish" series from October but also in issue one of upcoming anthology *Tales From The Road*.

> **"We're putting our own unique twist on these characters"**

"He's got deep ties to the Racer family," continues Pepose. "For him, racing is just as much about settling old scores as it is about crossing the finish line. He winds up being the Vin Diesel to Speed's Paul Walker as they establish this uneasy partnership."

Starting out racing in back-alleys to raise cash to save his home, Speed is dramatically elevated to the Formula X League. "As we'll see in the first couple of issues, something big happens to the Racer family," teases Pepose. "It adds massive stakes to Speed's journey to the championship and provides the narrative spine for the whole series."

Praising his "perfect style that bridges manga influences with Western artwork", Pepose is enjoying working with Davide Tinto. "He does such an incredible job with the speed and intensity of the car chases," he says. "Everything is so fluid and the cars themselves really are distinct characters."

Speed Racer is out on 30 July.

Cover art for this year's *Special*, by Chris Weston.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Dog Days

Judge Dredd and Strontium Dog take a summer break in this year's **2000 AD Sci-Fi Special**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

LIKE CHRISTMAS ANNUALS, summer specials were for decades a fun, extra-length treat for British weekly comic readers. It's a tradition that this year's *2000 AD Sci-Fi Special* emulates, as characters like Judge Dredd, Strontium Dog and Ampney Crucis head off on holiday.

"I like both summer specials and annuals, although specials have always been a bit more ephemeral compared to hardbacked annuals, so there's a definite summer holiday flavour in that sense," says Al Ewing.

His Judge Dredd tale is a sequel to John Wagner, Alan Grant and Carlos Esquerra's "Costa Del Blood" from 1989's *Judge Dredd Annual*. "The location is as much the star as the Judge himself. It's just another day's law enforcement for Dredd, but for the readers it's a trip to a part of the Meg they maybe haven't seen for a long time, as well as a rematch with a very old Judge Dredd foe."

Johnny Alpha doesn't have much downtime when he and his fellow Strontium Dogs track a bad guy to a holiday planet, in a tale scripted by Karl Stock and illustrated by Jake Lynch. "They want to pick up the fat bounty on his head because even when Johnny's on holiday, he's always working," says Stock. "I really like trying to emulate that sparseness of dialogue which Stront stories have, and also writing Middenface McNulty, one of my favourite unsung *2000 AD* characters."

Ian Edginton, meanwhile, is returning to offbeat investigator Ampney Crucis – who last appeared in the prog in 2013 – this time in cahoots with his *Scarlet Traces* artist D'Israeli. "Out of all of our characters, Ampney seemed the best suited to a story about going on holiday," says Edginton.

"His stories are effectively a lighthearted – albeit gory at times – mash-up of Agatha Christie and HP Lovecraft, so having our guy take a trip down the Nile just slotted in perfectly with the theme.

"Also, in his previous adventures he's not ventured outside of Europe, so dropping him into Egypt gave him a new environment to react against, as he's taken out of his Home Counties comfort zone and dropped in a boat on the Nile where new horrors abound."

With Cyd Finlea already travelling around the far-flung corners of the universe in writer Dan Abnett and artist Mark Harrison's "The Out", taking a mini-break might be more like a busman's holiday for the Global Neographic photojournalist.

"As 'The Out' already has a kind of vacation theme, the trick was to play that aspect up front and centre, as a real 'tourist moment' for Cyd," explains Abnett.

"The story also had to be self-contained whereas the ongoing strip is episodic but long-form. So we needed a satisfying one-and-done tale that acts as a showcase of the strip's tone and feel. I think we've done a good job and we certainly had fun."

The 2000 AD Sci-Fi Special 2025 is out on 16 July.

SCI-FACT! **The first *2000 AD Summer Special* was released in June 1977 – it was renamed the *Sci-Fi Special* in 1978.**

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

State Of Decay

Director Joseph Sims-Dennett leads us into the dark heart of Australia to unleash **The Banished**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

THERE ARE CERTAIN LOCALES that inspire dread, and fiction. For filmmaker Joseph Sims-Dennett, it was the dense forests of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales, Australia that became the fertile ground upon which he based his latest horror film *The Banished*.

"My last film was set in an apartment, so I wanted to do something more of an odyssey where there's a trek," Sims-Dennett tells Red Alert, explaining why he pursued a more remote backdrop in which to stage *The Banished*. "At the time, I was living in Sydney, and you could just drive an hour and 45 minutes and you're in the Blue Mountains, which is where we shot a lot of this. It's just endless bush to the horizon forever up there."

During one of his hikes, he came upon an abandoned iron ore mining settlement that was a bustling community 150 years ago. "And then they abandoned it," he says of the company who owned the mine. "Now it's all really eerie and quite spooky up there. It was just very sad seeing it decay, that beautiful, old Victorian town. So I was mapping that onto this story where the core theme and driver is guilt being a corrupting force."

Sims-Dennett connected the place to a story he was working on about a young woman named Grace who survived an abusive household by escaping – but leaving her brother David behind in the process. "Grace is feeling as though she abandoned her brother, so I let that metaphor loop back into what happened to the town, and it being a company town and losing its core purpose, so it decays and corrupts."

He also looked to two other Aussie films that he loves for tone and structure, Carl Schultz's murder mystery *Goodbye Paradise* (1982) and Peter Weir's haunting classic *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975). "*Goodbye* inspired the story and the structure and the kinetic energy to it, in terms of somebody looking for somebody," he details. "Then they end up being in the bush, in the middle of nowhere, in a hippie commune. *Picnic At Hanging Rock* is genuinely just one of the creepiest, strangest films and that's actually how it feels when you are in the middle of nowhere in Australia."

> **"It was just me and my mates, literally 10 people running around with a camera"**

For Sims-Dennett, capturing that authentic haunted feeling and imbuing *The Banished* with it was essential, so he packed up his crew and actors (who are also his friends), and headed into the Blue Mountains.

"To be honest, people say that they make movies in the bush and in the desert, and they don't," he laughs. "They'll probably be just outside of Adelaide because it's expensive making movies. But we were lucky because it was just me and my mates, literally 10 people running around with a camera."

Grace finds a lovely spot for just hanging out.

Red Alert

Things are looking grim for Grace (Meg Eloise-Clarke).

"Well, *you* read the map then if it's so easy."

"Is there something on my face? Be honest."

He also got cinematographer Sam Powyer to capture the natural impact of recent bush fires and the stark terrain that envelops an abandoned train tunnel for maximum dread. "We couldn't be overly composed and fussy, simply because we only had 13 and a half days to shoot the film," he adds.

The wilderness trek happens because Grace (Meg Eloise-Clarke) discovers that her brother's gone missing, so she hires Mr Green (Leighton Cardno), a field guide, to take her to the remote commune where David (Gautier de Fontaine) was last seen.

"It feels quite natural as you're following the main characters through the environment, so you feel like you're inside Grace a lot more," Sims-Dennett says of how she pulls the audience along with her. "I think it really works, especially with that centre part of the film, when it's Grace and Mr Green just wandering."

Grace's journey becomes a quasi bush *Heart Of Darkness* quest, as guilt permeates her. "If you feel guilt, you're supposed to take action on that," the director says. "She should have faced her fears much earlier. Whereas doing it all after the fact, it's slowly breaking her down and destroying her.

"That's why it's scary, the corruption in her, of her getting sick on this journey and being injured and then realising what's happened to her brother in her absence.

"Hopefully people see a bit of that core theme and have a nice, scary time watching it. And they enjoy that world more than Grace does," Sims-Dennett adds, with an evil smile.

At the very least, with *The Banished* he's content in having added his own voice to the unique and distinctly Australian genre known as bush horror films – and can only hope it inspires the next filmmaker to take the torch and run with it as he did.

The Banished is available digitally from 28 July.

SCI-FACT! **Meg Eloise-Clarke previously had a brief stint in long-running Australian soap opera *Home And Away*.**

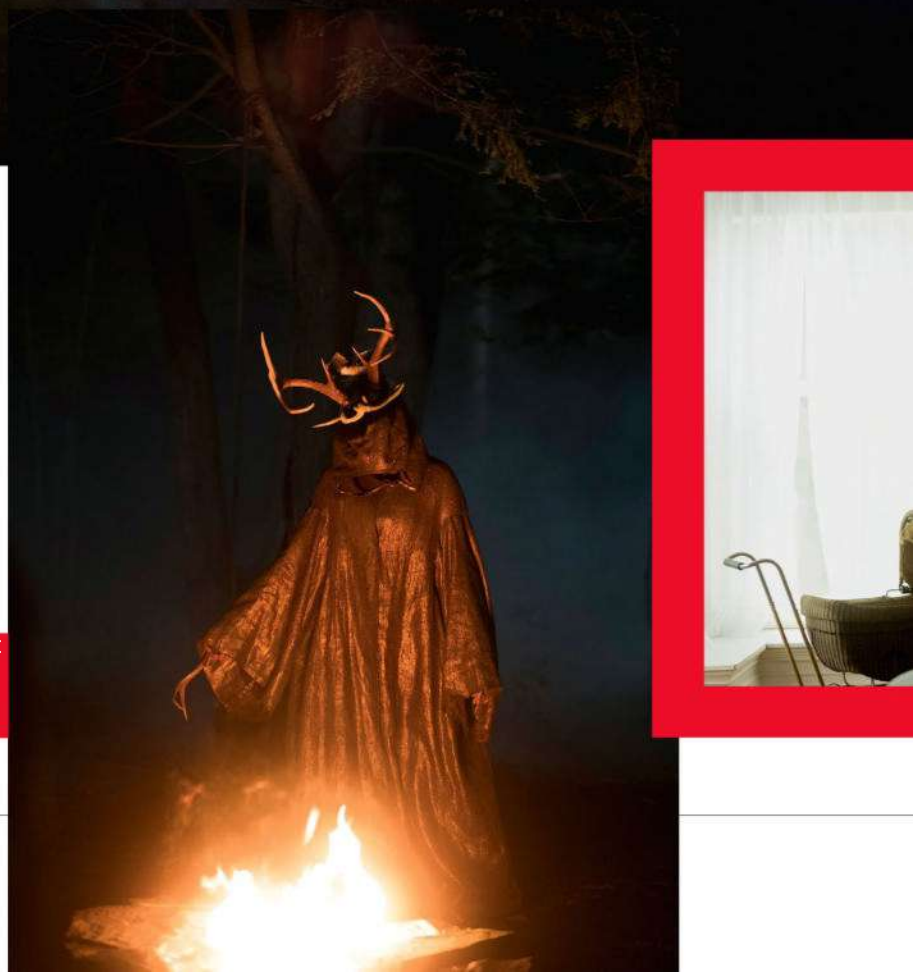
DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Baby Mine

Director Ross Partridge dips his toe into the world of folk horror with his original thriller **Birthrite**

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

Pregnancy is the stuff of nightmares in this film.



Someone's got a bad case of the horn(s). Arf.

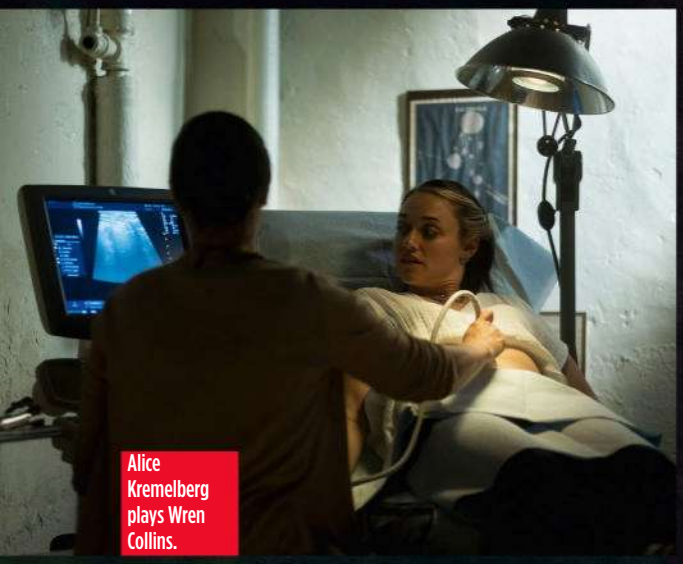
MIX A PREGNANCY STORY WITH a creepy home in the middle of nowhere, and the horror practically writes itself. Actor and director Ross Partridge tells Red Alert he felt the same way when he asked to read actor Patch Darragh's (*Succession*) first original screenplay, centred on a pregnant couple who relocate from the city to the country to live in the home bequeathed to them by a deceased aunt.

"My wife and I, Jennifer Lafleur [*Nope*], were developing another idea for a while about past lives," Partridge says. "But there was something about this script that just resonated to me about the place we were all at post-Covid, and thinking about our rights and giving up so much ownership of all of our freedoms. It was a well-concocted genre movie that had some themes in it that I was like, 'They're a little obtuse, but I am really intrigued by it.'"

In early 2023, they did some rewrites on the script which became what is now *Birthrite*, and Partridge decided it would be his next directorial effort, following his well-received 2015 feature directorial debut *Lamb*. Aware that the WGA and SAG strikes were looming, they spent most of March into April developing the script and then pulled the trigger to try and complete production on the film before the strikes began that summer.

Knowing that they needed to shoot on location inside a moody old house, they got permission to shoot in an 1860s farmhouse near his wife's family home in Brookfield, Massachusetts. "I always knew that I wanted to film something in that space because it had never been filmed in, and it has all this great history," Partridge explains.

"The cow from the Elmer's Glue [logo] was basically from this farm. And it all just fell into place. We went into prep, and I kid you not, we scouted it and then we started casting



Alice Kremelberg plays Wren Collins.

Juani Feliz (right) appears as Maya.

You can't go wrong with a creepy-looking child.

"Rosemary's baby? No, it's mine, actually."

immediately. We picked a start date and were shooting within five weeks of that."

During an 18-day shoot that completed just before the strikes started, Partridge locked his first folk horror film. "My previous film had a lot of emotional horror, but not physical," he says. "It was not in the genre space the way this one was, so it was appealing, and it was a challenge for me."

Birthrite tells the story of pregnant Wren Collins (Alice Kremelberg), who sees the bequeathed home and the move as an opportunity to start anew with her girlfriend. What they don't know is that the house and the area carry with it a cursed history that threatens the life of their unborn child. The film also stars Lafleur, Michael Chernus (*Severance*), and Juani Feliz (*Civil War*).

Partridge says he looked to the films of David Lynch, Jordan Peele and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* to help him establish the unsettling tone that permeates the movie. "I came at it thinking that it was more of a psychological thriller/drama with horrible moments," he says of the overall vibe. "We never really were intrigued by the blood stuff or the violence, as we were more about getting into the character of Wren and her world, the headspace of loss, and the relationship between them. From that, there's the fear and the tension that this world brings."

Not wanting to spoil too much, Partridge says *Birthrite* explores what happens when a character wants something so much that it becomes everything to them. He says he used his and his wife's own experiences with IVF, and becoming a parent later in life after he was initially ambivalent about fatherhood, to help him centre Wren's perspective at the heart of the film.

"When somebody is telling you can't have something, and you want it, there's a desire and a motivation around seeing something you're about to lose and how tragic it is," he says. "It's a really powerful thing. The whole world around it is just so loaded and fraught with tension and beauty and joy and fear, and all these things. It's a cool sandbox to play in."

> **"We never really were intrigued by the blood stuff or the violence"**

Prior to securing distribution this summer, *Birthrite* won the 2024 Audience Award at the horror festival Popcorn Frights, and Best Drama at LGBTQ Unbordered Film Festival. Having won the approval of discerning horror fans, Partridge wants another go at the genre.

"I would love to be able to do it again with the right kind of prep and lead-in, designing these types of landscapes and shots and feelings, because it's a lot of fun to play with people this way," he says.

"I feel like I'm starting to find my voice with tension building and tonal heaviness with landscape and beauty, and finding the juxtaposition between the two."

Birthrite is in US cinemas from 8 August.

SCI-FACT! **Star Alice Kremelberg played the dark arts user Sofia Wilmot in the Disney+ series *Renegade Nell*.**

SCI-FACT! **Peter David also co-created the Nickelodeon sci-fi show *Space Cases* with *Lost In Space* star Bill Mumy.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

PETER DAVID 1956-2025

Remembering the self-styled "Writer of Stuff"

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"EVERY STORY HAS A VENUE IN which it's best suited to be told," believed Peter David, whose prolific, franchise-spanning career embraced comics, novels, videogames and TV shows. "It's a matter of learning to adapt."

Born in Fort Meade, Maryland, David attended New York University, graduating with a BA in journalism. After being published in *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine in 1980 he put a writing career on hold to work in Marvel's sales department. When an editor commissioned him to write a fill-in story for *The Spectacular Spider-Man* in 1985 it was seen as a conflict of interest, stirring up office politics. He was, he recalled, "persona non grata" for a while.

David then took on the challenge of writing *The Incredible Hulk*, a dying title no other writer wanted to touch. Given free rein, he reinvigorated the green (and sometimes grey) behemoth and transformed the book into an Eisner Award-winning hit during a 12-year run particularly marked by inventive twists and a trademark wit.

Quitting the sales department for a full-time freelance career, David wrote for both Marvel and DC, earning credits on everything from *Supergirl* to *X-Factor*. A stint on *Aquaman* toughened up the character, swapping a hand for a harpoon, while *Spider-Man 2099* gave the wall-crawler a cyberpunk spin.

Along with a memorable run on DC's licensed comic book, David wrote such acclaimed *Star Trek* novels as *Vendetta*, *Q-Squared* and *Imzadi* and launched the *New Frontier* range, a spin-off series showcasing his own Starfleet crew.

He adapted blockbusters from *Batman Forever* to *Iron Man* and also wrote his own novels, beginning with 1987's *Knight Life*. Moving from print to screen, David scripted the *Babylon 5* episodes "Soul Mates" and "There All The Honor Lies" as well as "Ruling From The Tomb" for sequel series *Crusade*.

PRENTIS HANCOCK 1942-2025

British actor known for appearances in *Doctor Who* and *Space: 1999*.

ED GALE 1963-2025

In-suit performer for Chucky in *Child's Play* 1 and *2*, and *Bride Of Chucky*.

STEVEN A HENRY/WIREIMAGE. © MARVEL.

NEW AUTHOR

ALLISON KING

MEET THE SOFTWARE ENGINEER BEHIND MAGICAL REALIST TALE *THE PHOENIX PENCIL COMPANY*

JIMMY ZENG

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ I have two: Monica, a modern-day software engineer, and her grandmother Yun. Yun's story focuses on her family's pencil company in '40s–'50s Shanghai, Taiwan and America. Monica's covers a few months when she's home for the semester taking care of her ageing grandparents.

Tell us about the family's special power...
→ They have the ability to "Reforge" a pencil, to revive whatever a pencil once wrote before. Their power ends up being used as a means of encryption by the government during the war, but also becomes a means of surveillance.

Did the story have a particular spark?
→ I read Helen Zia's *Last Boat Out Of Shanghai*, an account of four families who fled Shanghai during the '40s–'50s. It got me thinking about my own family history, and the pencil company they really did run back then.

You're a software engineer too. Are any of the skills transferable to writing a novel?
→ I think it makes you a bit more willing to rewrite or remove words. My best code contributions have been when I've been able to remove a lot of lines of code.

Got any advice for budding authors?
→ Go to your local bookstore's events! It's a great way to hear authors talk craft, while also supporting your local community.

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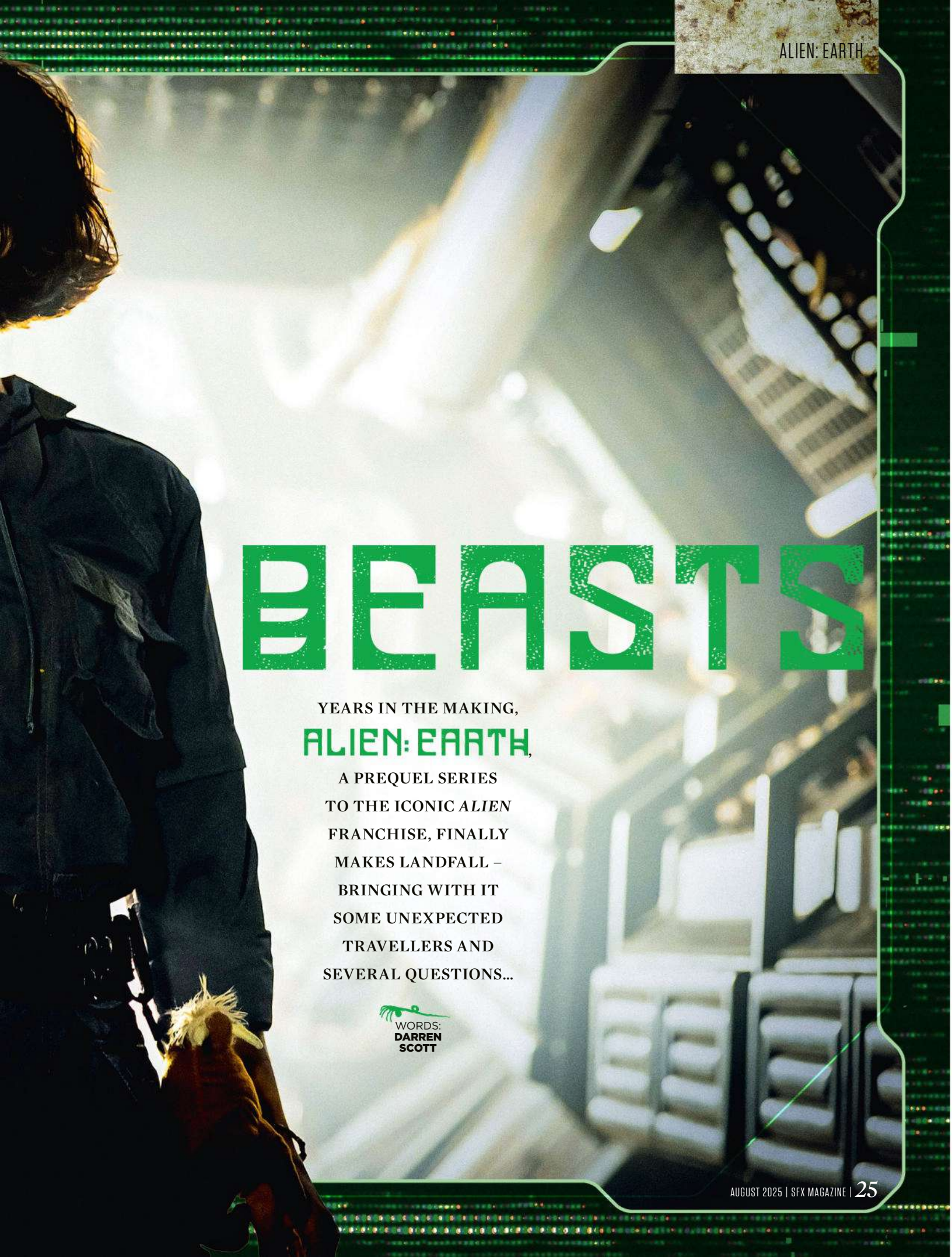


BEASTS

YEARS IN THE MAKING, ALIEN: EARTH, A PREQUEL SERIES TO THE ICONIC *ALIEN* FRANCHISE, FINALLY MAKES LANDFALL – BRINGING WITH IT SOME UNEXPECTED TRAVELLERS AND SEVERAL QUESTIONS...

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

THERE'S A LOUD CLANG AT THE TOP of our conversation with Noah Hawley. It's the sound of the esteemed director, and now showrunner and creator of *Alien: Earth*, dropping a name – a big one.

"I ended up having a conversation with Denis Villeneuve because his movies, I've never seen anyone better at showing me that something is big," he tells *SFX*. "That feeling of being dwarfed by the size of a ship or a sandworm...

"One of the things that was really important to me to convey was a sense of scale. I wasn't looking for trade secrets because I also feel it's about intimacy as well. You have to have the two, the big and the small. That's what's really important to me in this show and I think we've achieved it."

Wait, hold up. Before we can even talk about the series, we have to address the name drop. "It's a pretty good one, right?" he laughs. "Why lie? The guy's a master, one of the greats."

What might the keeper of the keys to Arrakis, and incoming Bond director, have to offer the *Alien* franchise?

"It's all about story at the end of the day," Hawley says. "The moment that it's style over substance, you're in trouble. That's clear from his work and from our conversation and clear to me as well, of how to mix practical effects with the visual effects.

> **"I pride myself on making things that look like they cost twice what I actually had"**

"I come from a model of doing more with less, I pride myself on making things that look like they cost twice what I actually had. Some of that is just vision and execution. But you also have to know where to spend the money to make things feel big."

Big is certainly the word for prequel series *Alien: Earth*. The series filmed in Bangkok, Thailand – the first full Western television show created there – with an enormous build over 13 sound stages. More than just a creature feature, it's the story of warring corporations in the race for immortality. The first episode sees a Weyland-Yutani ship – containing some non-human specimens which may advance that race – crash into Prodigy City in New Siam.

"If you have a story about monsters coming to Earth, the question is, will *humanity* survive? Then the next question is, does humanity deserve to survive? This idea about humanity and the terrible things that we do to each other, it really opened my mind as to the types of horror that would populate the show, not just body horror or creature horror, but also the moral horror of what people do."

INCOMING COMMUNICATION

The journey to an *Alien* television series started, Hawley recalls, with network FX – having worked with him on *Legion* – asking him in 2018 what he'd do with the franchise.

"I came up with this Lost Boy/Peter Pan transhuman story. But it was pre-Disney [merger] and the film studio 20th [Century Fox] was not, in the end, willing to share the IP. It took a few more years before they were willing."

David W Zucker, Chief Creative Officer for Ridley Scott's production company Scott Free and executive producer, says that over the decades there was "a certain reluctance" from Scott Free to develop an *Alien* series. "We were definitely told to stay away during the era of →

Director Noah Hawley (centre) hangs with the gang.

Alex Lawther, Diêm Camille and Moe Bar-El.

"Join the military! It's FUN!"

Sandra Yi Sencindiver as Yutani. (Hey, wait a min...!)

PICTURES: PATRICK BROWN/FX. STOCK IMAGES: THE7DEW, EGOR SUVOROV, THE_BURTONS, NEUEVECTOR/GETTY

ALEX LAWTHER

is "Hermit", a human soldier

Tell us about Hermit.

He's the brother of Wendy, who was formerly known as Marcy when she was a child. She and he had not been in contact since her transformation into this artificial body that she's in. For Hermit, that's the whole heart of his storyline throughout the series, his relationship to his sister and the complications that arise because of that and where in this new circumstance that they find themselves in.

How to take care of her, but also how to leave her the space that she now needs. That's the bare bones of Hermit's story.

Was the project pitched to you as an *Alien* series?

These things are so cloak and dagger, when they first come to actors. But I'd heard a suggestion that it was part of some big science fiction franchise. After auditioning I met Noah and he talked me through the journey of Hermit throughout the season and much more of an outline of the whole of the season in general, so quite quickly I was coming to terms with being part of the world that is *Alien*.

I was thrilled in the sense that I know and love the first movie, I think it's really exquisite in what it does. Then also knowing Noah's work and his capacity to take some original source material and make his own universe from it. He has such an expansive imagination, it seemed like an interesting concoction.

What's it like working with Noah day to day?

He's got quite a mischievous imagination. I've directed two tiny short films and I really appreciated watching him as a director going up to actors and saying, "Oh, I think your character woke up with a cold today" and it's a piece of tiny information. Doesn't mean anything to the audience, but gives something for the actor to hold and play. Maybe they were just, that day, in the back of shot, but he understands that every detail has a potential for richness. There's no broad glaze; he was really going in and giving everyone quite finely painted details from the very beginning, which is lovely.

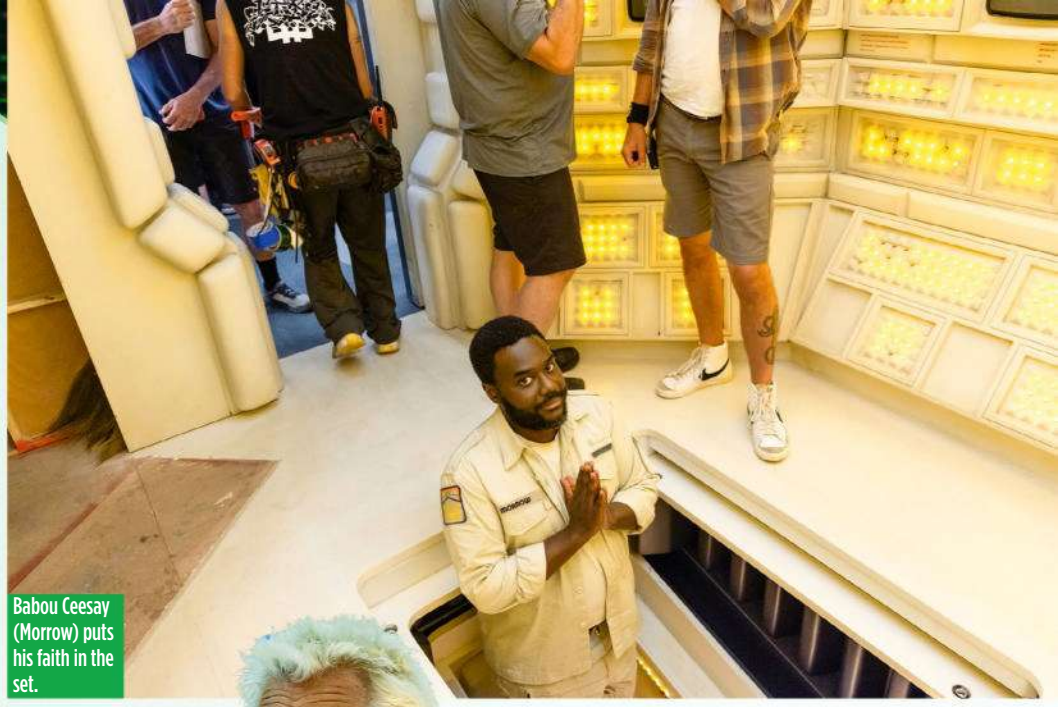
What's it like meeting a xenomorph?

The main one that I contend with is played by a New Zealander called Cameron, who's a vegan and the most softly spoken man I think I've ever met. I think he has training in ballet. So it was all quite surreal for that when he's looming over us, frightening, sure, but once he's got his mask off and he's eating vegan spring rolls, it takes away some of the fear.

Also, I didn't realise just how long those sequences take. It would be half a page, but we'd shoot it for two weeks. That rhythm I've never experienced before, the real slowness of those things and trying to keep it over those two weeks... Make those five seconds that we end up filming seem full of energy, and maybe actually there's something quite lethargic about filming like that.

What's your takeaway memory from filming?

Probably either to do with the sets that we were shooting, whole laboratories and buildings and streets. Or when we were shooting on location in the real world and to be in Thailand. To be in a climate – and in a language that was foreign from mine – was a really beautiful, extraordinary, surreal thing.



Babou Ceesay (Morrow) puts his faith in the set.

when Ridley [Scott] was doing the films." Even when *Alien: Earth* was greenlit, he says there was much conversation about whether to take the audience to wholly new terrain or give recognisable access. In the end, it's both.

"We obviously have [that] out of the gate where you're seeing this experience on the ship. When Ridley first saw it, he was like, 'Wow, fuck me. I know that ship, and I know that world.' While still being able to have some intimacy and some connectivity to what you may have experienced before, you certainly need not have seen the films to enjoy what's been crafted here."

Hawley grins when talking about the sets. "You don't really understand the feeling you have as a human being when you recreate sets from a movie that's iconic from your childhood. That feeling of stepping onto the bridge or the communication room or the cryo chamber or the mess hall of the Maginot, which was almost – to the material – a facsimile of the Nostromo.

"It collapses time. You go back to being a 10-year-old and you've stepped through the screen into the movie. You really can't overestimate the power that that has for you as a storyteller. The things that inspired me are

> **"My hope is that people who watch this will never do anything comfortably again"**

the reasons that I'm doing this. They're powerful feelings.

"This journey has been, in many ways, a five-year season one journey," Hawley considers. "But the good thing about taking all that time is that you stress-test it and you really workshop it and you earn it. It's like that first album, you have your whole life to write those songs and then it's the second album that's the hard one."

He likens the initial idea to *Legion*. "My thought then was, 'Take the superpowers out of it, what's the show?' Here, my approach to *Alien* was, 'Take the creatures out of it, what's the show?' Because it needs to work 30, 50, 70 hours. It's gonna work as a great drama. Then you add the creatures in and it becomes elevated genre storytelling.

"Shows like *Battlestar Galactica* or *Game Of Thrones* – when you have great dramatic storytelling with sci-fi elements, that's the best story you're ever going to watch."

But worry not, creatures are very much a part of the series – and not just the Alien.

"These are five unique species that have been collected on this Maginot ship, which I saw as like the HMS Beagle, Charles Darwin going around collecting his specimens from around the universe," Hawley explains. "The reason that I did that is because I think if I have a skill at reinventing these classic films for television, it's in understanding what the original movie made me feel and why, and then recreating those feelings for you.

"On some level, the most critical feeling that you get from seeing *Alien* for the first time is the one that's impossible to recreate, which is discovery of the life cycle of this creature. Every time you think that you know what this monster is, it changes into something worse. You can't ever get back with those creatures. But if I bring in new creatures, you don't know how they reproduce, what they eat, how they're parasites...

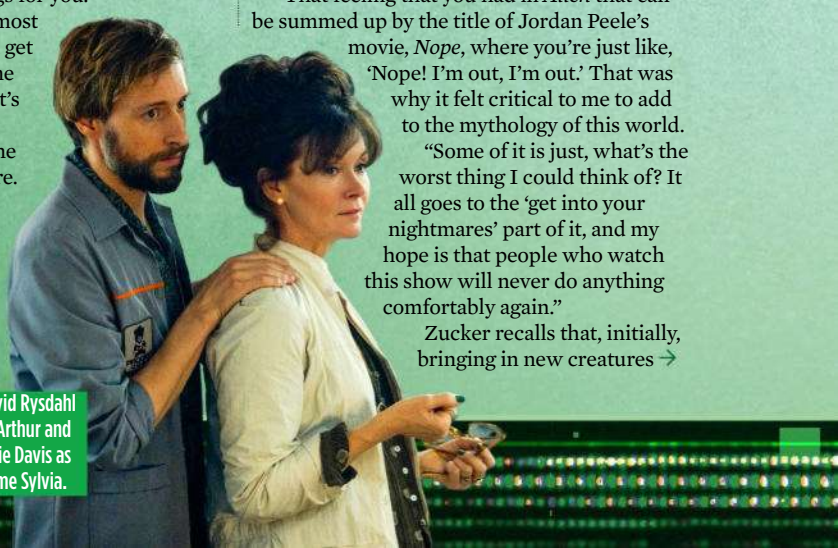
"My hope is that we'll reawaken those feelings in the viewer when they watch the show from week to week, and they go, 'Oh, I don't like that at all. That's awful, that creature. What? It breeds how? I don't want to...'

"That feeling that you had in *Alien* that can be summed up by the title of Jordan Peele's movie, *Nope*, where you're just like, 'Nope! I'm out, I'm out.' That was why it felt critical to me to add to the mythology of this world.

"Some of it is just, what's the worst thing I could think of? It all goes to the 'get into your nightmares' part of it, and my hope is that people who watch this show will never do anything comfortably again."

Zucker recalls that, initially, bringing in new creatures →

Timothy Olyphant as Kirsh (plus murky friend).



David Rysdahl as Arthur and Essie Davis as Dame Sylvia.

BABOU CEESAY

is Morrow, a Weyland-Yutani employee

Tell us about Morrow.

I'm not going to tell you his first name. That's a giveaway. Something's going to happen later in the series with that. But he works for Weyland-Yutani. He's a cyborg. This is something that will confuse the audience for a bit and then become clear.

A synth is essentially an AI, extremely advanced [in] 2120, who is in a synthetic body. Then you've got a cyborg, which is a human being with enhancements. So he's had enhancements, he's had this arm that's been added on.

There's a bit of a backstory as to why it's his arm that we will get revealed as the series unfolds. He's got some extra bits of tech inside his head and body. It just makes him human plus. Then you've got the hybrid, which is human consciousness inside the body of a synthetic body.

Morrow is an iPhone 1, essentially, in an iPhone 20 world, because Wendy is in another zone in terms of what she represents. But it makes Morrow into a very interesting character. He's not one to take things lying down.

What's it like walking onto the Maginot spaceship set?

Mind-blowing. The first day I walked out to the bridge, which is a rebuild of the Nostomo – to some really tiny details – and of course, we all rewatched the *Alien* movies a few times in preparation for it. It was just like being a kid. Amazing. But it wasn't just me. It was at least 100-something people there. Everybody was behaving the same way, including Noah. You see this sense of, "Oh, look at this, look at where we're standing." There's something about it.

What's it like having an Alien encounter?

We have an actual Alien played by Cameron, and he's in his suit, he's eight foot tall. It drools, it works – the mouths come out, it snarls. It's really terrifying. My first encounter with it was during our screen test. Noah shoots these very elaborate screen tests in full costume, as if he's shooting the thing.

I had the moment where it's standing in front of me, eight feet tall, snarling in your face. Your reptilian brain kicks in: "This is not a good situation." I felt goosebumps, feeling a little bit uncomfortable, feeling a bit put in a corner, and I thought, "Oh! Oh, okay. This is an unexpected reaction."

Tell us about a standout moment during filming.

We were in a very, very stunning location that you probably never get a chance to actually stop at. You'd look at it from a distance, but we were actually there, and that blew me away. That was a day that was uncomfortable. There were interesting creatures around, real ones. But I just felt so at peace. I don't want to give away where it is because it gives away some of the story!

What was it like working with Noah?

Amazing. I was really lucky, I got to work with him quite a lot and we just had an ease. He has such a clear vision in terms of what he wants, but at the same time, he's not a big noter. He's not gonna come in and keep saying, "Do this, do that." He's hired you for your job. He's allowing you to create your version of what you see on the page.

Then if you see something that needs something, he comes in, but just a nice calming presence. You know he's there, you think, "Okay, everything's gonna be fine." All three directors were really something.

Adarsh Gourav as Slightly, Jonathan Ajayi as Smee.

raised eyebrows. "From word one on the page, the area of greatest concern and undeniable challenge [was] that Noah was envisioning not a singular, but multiple new creatures that were to be introduced. It's something Ridley's obviously acutely aware of and was most cautionary about. It's difficult to deliver one great new creature. But to take on the magnitude of what Noah was envisioning was kind of breathless.

"It got a big 'Whoa' out of him [Ridley] at the beginning. The ambition and the originality of what Noah had conceived and his designs on what he endeavoured to accomplish was significant."

MOTHER BOARD

Hawley says he had "a bunch of conversations" with Ridley Scott before embarking on the show. "What I said to him [was], 'I am adapting your movie. I'm not looking at seven movies that I have to work into some kind of hodgepodge of a show.

"I'm adapting Ridley Scott's *Alien*, with some flavours of James Cameron. It's those two films from my youth that I lived with for the 40 years that they've existed.' I think he really appreciated that, that there were a lot of original ideas that I brought to it, but I understood, for lack of a better word, what the brand is."

But how do xenomorphs exist on Earth before they've been discovered in the original movie? Hawley says navigating timelines is "a tightrope".

"The interesting thing about the lack of mythology is the people who find those first eggs have been out of contact with Earth for who knows how long. So there is a grey area that we could play in and try to create something with as big a scale as possible to justify the title, while still making it credible for the rest of the canon.

"In the films that I reference, which is mostly the first two, we never really see these creatures within an ecosystem. They're always an apex predator existing in a space with no other wildlife.

"I was interested in that idea of, if you're going to bring these creatures to a terrestrial environment, how are they going to change it and how are other creatures, bugs, any of it going to interact with them? Some of that we address, some of that is still percolating for future stories."

Zucker notes that work has begun on crafting what might be a second season, and Hawley is hopeful of a renewal. "I'm a firm believer that endings give stories meaning. You have to know, if not what the last frame is, at least what the end of the thought is. I'm starting here and I'm going here and therefore, I have to build it in this way to get to that third act.

"I remember conversations with Damon Lindeloff, back when we were both at ABC and he was making *Lost*, and he said they wouldn't give him an out. They wouldn't let him end the show and so he didn't know how to tell the story. Literally, season three of that show, they're in a cage because he doesn't know how much story he has.

"With *Legion*, I had a three-act structure. I didn't know if that was going to take three seasons or five seasons, but I knew what the three major thoughts of the story were. And here, I feel like I have that as well.

"We created it as a recurring series, and I have great plans and ambitions for it as such"

"We created it as a recurring series, and I have great plans and ambitions for it as such. On the film side, I've had some conversations with them. This is not a Kevin Feige Marvel Universe moment. I'm not saying that in success, that we shouldn't be coordinating or thinking big picture about that – the show has to be a hit before you can really have those conversations."

Alien: Earth is on Disney+ from 13 August.

"But you said joining the military was fun..."

Adrian Edmondson (yes, really) as Atom Eins.

Hermit goes for a nice relaxing boat ride.

Kirsh doesn't have time for this fancy science stuff.

SAMUEL BLENKIN

is Boy Kavalier, a human CEO

Tell us about Boy Kavalier.

He's a very young tech CEO of Prodigy, a company that has rapidly expanded in a number of years to rival some of the other larger corporations in our universe. He was one of those wonder boy geniuses when he was younger. I don't want to tell you too much about his backstory, it gets revealed as we go through the show and there's some pretty wild stuff from his past, but the front that he gives to the rest of the world is the classic type, really.

He feels like he owns everything and everyone. In our universe the companies do genuinely run the world and own the land. I guess if you're in that position of power, it gives you a certain sense of entitlement, and I think that he wears that very clearly on his sleeve throughout the series.

What's it like being on set?

Mind-bendingly strange actually. I got a chance to walk around those sets. I don't have much action that takes place in those sets, but just stepping on what they made inside those studios in Bangkok where we were filming – the scale was just extraordinary. It's real attention to detail, and I love the fact that we went full in with the retro tech. It's just such an integral part of the original film and that vibe, and we fully committed to that.

Was there a particularly exciting moment for you?

I don't think this is giving away too much, but it's how excited my character gets about a certain lifeform who might be more familiar to us humans who live on Earth than we think.

There's one particular character in the show who's my favourite character who is definitely not human, but is definitely not completely an alien either.

My character develops quite a strong attachment to this particular creature. [Laughs] I won't say anything more about that, but that was a really exciting exciting part of the show for me.

What was it like working with Noah?

Dreamy. I'm a huge fan of his work anyway. I love working with people who have a very specific vision. If they have a specific idea of what a show should be, oddly enough that opens up space for you to have a sense of freedom. Some jobs, a lot of what actors tend to do is take a kind of mediocre script and make it sound as good as possible.

But when you're lucky enough to be working on a project like this, where the writing is really impeccable because Noah is so diligent and knows the world so well, you sit back and go, "Well, this structure's been made for me, and I just get to play in it."

It's a dream really, I feel very lucky.

SYDNEY CHANDLER

is Wendy, the first hybrid

What can you tell us about Wendy?

Wendy opens the show as being the eyes of the audience. We don't know where she is and it's quite similar for her. So we get to learn about this world that Noah's created through her eyes. Her main storyline, which I uncovered, was really about identity – growing into your own identity and finding your own identity, even if there are multiple other people around you telling you that you are something different.

That's the heartbeat of Wendy for me. Family is a really important piece for her too, her search for her brother comes before all, in her eyes. She's 11 years old in her mind and she wakes up in a fully-formed synthetic body. So it's easy, right? [Laughs]

It was an interesting process finding her. Noah was incredible by giving us so much freedom to find our characters. He wanted us to focus less on the physicality of what that might look like and really delve into the mind.

How aware of the *Alien* franchise were you before?

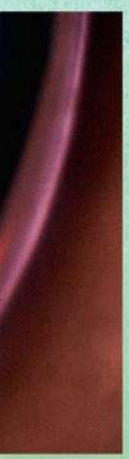
Initially, when I saw that they were making an *Alien* TV show, I was like, 'You can't recreate *Alien*. Just, no. You can't do that. There's too much respect and reverence out there for that film. It's just perfect as is.'

But then reading the scripts, Noah really was able to hone in on honouring and finding the essence of *Alien* and then creating his own world, creating his own characters, creating more room to play. So that got me really excited because recreating a movie like that is not possible and should not be possible.

> **"It was like jumping back into one of my nightmares as a child, which was funny"**

Sydney Chandler prepares for more running.

Wendy, an 11-year-old girl in an adult's body.



What's it like working with Noah day to day?

It was great. I worked with him on episode one, and then I filmed with Dana [Gonzales] and Ugla [Hauksdóttir] directing for the rest of my episodes. Noah filmed episode five and episode one. But we obviously did a lot of prep together as well. He really, really hands you the reins once he gives you a character. That can be scary and terrifying and also insanely liberating when you realise, "Oh, he's trusting me to bring this Wendy to life. And I'm going to do it."

Did you have any thoughts about following in Ripley's Reeboks?

Right when I got it, I went and watched *Alien* over again, and I was like, "I really wish I hadn't done that because it's just so good." [Laughs] Ripley is so strong. So I had to take a step back as an artist and go, "What strengths do I see in this character? What differences does she have as far as aligning with my strengths and my weaknesses?"

The throughline that I see with the female characters in the entire *Alien* franchise is one, they're not sexualised, and two, they could be played by any gender. They're not written to be the damsel in distress. There's no part on the page that says, "One tear falls from her eye." Women get angry. Women are brave. Women get scared. So it just encapsulates the whole person, the whole feminine energy that women have.

Being able to just focus on that, being able to play an authentic character, regardless if she's a female or whatever she is, she's one of a kind and she's strong. So I just leaned into that. I pulled a lot of strength from my character, especially living in her skin for so long.

Are you ready to be part of a sci-fi legend?

Oh, so I am a *massive* sci-fi nerd. I always have been, I always will be. So the little kid in me, she's just jumping up and down. It's amazing. I keep pinching myself. I'm like, "Oh, I'm a part of that." I watched the show and I was like, "I want to watch it again." And I realise "*I'm in that*. I got to do that." So it's incredible.

There's always the fear of being a fellow sci-fi fan of watching sci-fi that you don't like and it sucks. I was so nervous to watch this show for that reason. I was scared to let the little sci-fi nerd inside of me feel let down. But I sat down and watched it and I legitimately have never seen anything like it before, and that made me so happy.

I hope that when people watch it, they'll experience the same thing. There's a lot of love in it, and everyone involved *loves* sci-fi and admires the series so much. I hope that comes through the screen as well. I'm happy to say I've always been a nerd and I always will be. They are the best.

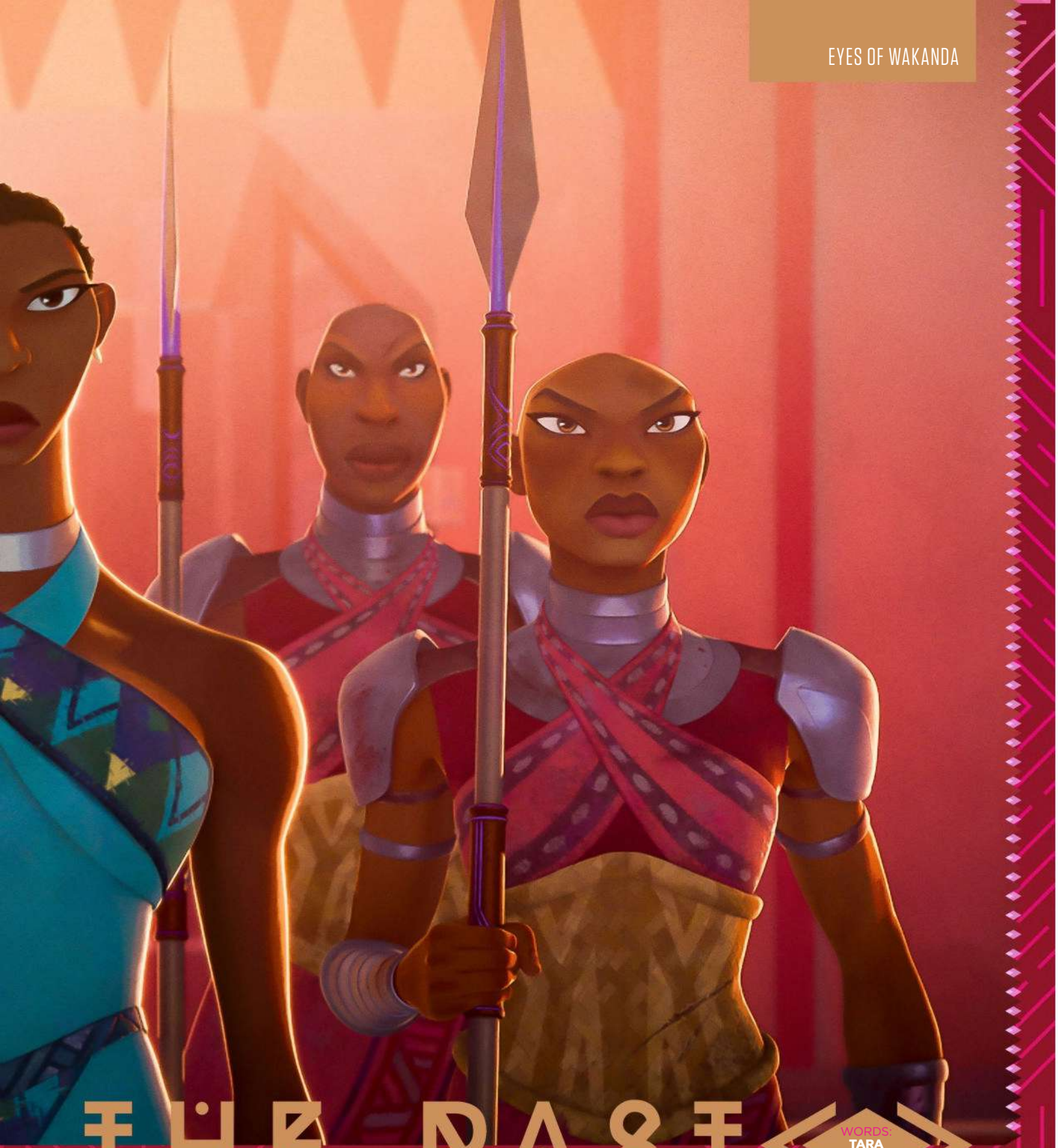
What's it like seeing xenomorphs for the first time?

It. Was. Incredible. It was like jumping back into one of my nightmares as a child, which was funny. When you're half-asleep and you're filming, it's not super scary, it's still amazing. But then when you jump into a couple of weeks of night shoots and it's 4.00am, you're running on adrenaline and candy and you have a real xenomorph chasing you, and you just have to run. I mean, you're *really* running!

It becomes quite scary. I remember a very specific moment when that happened, and I just started laughing after we called cut, because I was actually genuinely scared of another actor that you're playing with. We're in this huge, real set, it makes my job so easy, but it was just *awesome*, a dream, man.

ONE EYE ON

ARTIST TODD HARRIS EXPLAINS



THE PAST

WORDS: TARA BENNETT

THE LONG ROAD HE TRAVELLED TO CREATE THE ANIMATED SERIES **EYES OF WAKANDA**

Noni faces off with The Lion. Fight! Fight! Fight!

SINCE ITS OFFICIAL LAUNCH IN 2021 with *What If...?*, Marvel Animation has been quite a busy division of Marvel Studios. Under the guidance of Brad Winderbaum, Head of Streaming, Television and Animation, and Dana Vasquez-Eberhardt, Vice President of Animation, it has released three Marvel Cinematic Universe-set series and the revival series *X-Men '97*, all through Disney+.

The latest, *Eyes Of Wakanda*, is Marvel Animation's first collaboration with Ryan Coogler's Proximity Media. After the success of Coogler's live action *Black Panther* (2018), they entered a development deal to create new series set in and around the fictional country of Wakanda.

As is often the case with projects at Marvel Studios, ideas can gestate until the timing is right. This was exactly the case for storyboard artist Todd Harris. He joined the visual development team storyboarding sequences for their live action films, starting with *Thor: Ragnarok*, and worked alongside Bryan Andrews, who would go on to direct *What If...?*.

While they were both storyboarding sequences for *Avengers: Infinity War*, Harris tells *SFX*, he knew *Black Panther* was in production. So he took a chance pitching an animated Wakanda series to President of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, way before "the magic of Marvel Animation was even a glimmer in someone's eyes".

"He took my pitch and gave me a nice response," Harris remembers of Feige's reply. "I really appreciated him hearing me, then we got back to making *Infinity War*."

HISTORY REPEATING

Harris went on to storyboard for Coogler's *Black Panther*, where he took another shot at sharing his idea with the director. "I pitched Ryan because I believed in the concept and I really wanted to see it made, even if I wasn't going to be the one that helmed it," he explains. "12-year-old me wanted to see the story."

By 2019, Marvel Studios Animation had become a formal division, and Harris says Andrews "disappeared into the Marvel Animation hole". Meanwhile, he kept storyboarding for Marvel Studios' live action slate, until Winderbaum and Coogler came back to him about their animation development slate.

"They were like, 'Hey, remember that thing you mentioned? and I was like, 'Yeah, I sure do,' because I was actually working towards directing at that time," Harris says, recalling the conversation.

Marvel Animation wanted a more standalone series, and Harris's initial idea fitted into what they wanted to explore about the Wakandan warriors known as the Hatut Zeraze, who throughout their history in the comics have protected their country and its Vibranium from discovery by the outside world. Harris says that out of nowhere, suddenly the creative stars aligned, and he was asked to develop and direct what became *Eyes Of Wakanda*.

Going back to what originally inspired his pitch, Harris says his love of history was the impetus for the series idea. "There is a long intersection of Marvel Comics and world history. You have the Asgardians, the Olympians, the Eternals, yadda, yadda, yadda," he says. "That was the more interesting part about how Marvel intersected in the past we know, and from the different viewpoint of Wakanda. I wanted to contribute in a new way to the new animation landscape, and my own interests allowed me to do that."

By looking to the past for story ideas that would connect with Wakandan lore, Harris could also avoid the trap of many Disney+ MCU projects that dovetail into the ever expanding and intricate mythology laid out in the feature films and streaming series. "Let's be honest, *What If...?* handled current intersections with the Marvel Universe enough," Harris says frankly. "Bryan had that handled, so I didn't need to jump in that pool, and I was allowed to do what I do."

The Lion (centre) is voiced by Cress Williams.

After some changes were made to the output goals of Marvel Animation, the order for the first season settled on four episodes that would each tell a story about the Hatut Zeraze, set in different eras of world history. During the work-from-home era, Harris put together a virtual writers' room that included screenwriter/Marvel Comics writer Geoffrey Thorne, TV writer Marc Bernardin, *What If...?* writer Matthew Chauncey, working with a team of executive producers.

"The first episode dumps us into the closing of the Western Bronze Age," Harris teases of the pilot episode, which was first screened in June at the Annecy International Animation Film Festival. The choice of that era was inspired by Coogler, who'd heard a story on the radio about the Sea Peoples purported to exist around 1200 BC, and brought it to the writers.

STOCK IMAGES: PASSIONARTIST; MARYLIADESIGN/GETTY

Setting off to found your own country. *Easy.*

"Sea Peoples is an interesting, semi-contested concept during the fall of the Western civilisation," Harris explains. "A whole bunch of seafaring raiders basically picked apart all these civilisations off the coast of the Mediterranean and brought them down towards the end of the Bronze Age."

This hypothesised civilisation got Coogler thinking about Wakandans cross-pollinating with that lore. That evolved into their opening episode, which features an errant Wakandan general known as the Lion (voiced by Cress Williams) leaving his country and stealing Vibranium tech to build his own Kingdom.

Harris says creatively they asked, "What if that person was one of the *Star Trek* Africans who decided they'd rather put out their own flag someplace else? What kind of impact does that have on the world?" To stop him, Noni (voiced by Winnie Harlow), a disgraced former Dora Milaje warrior, is given the opportunity to redeem herself and bring the general back to their people.

Outside of that specific suggestion, Harris says Coogler gave him a lot of wiggle room to flesh out *Eyes Of Wakanda* to his liking. "To be honest, I was trying not to bug him so much because he was buried under *Wakanda Forever*," Harris says. "But whenever he popped up, it was always like getting an Amazon delivery. He would give us suggestions, pitches and then disappear in a puff of Wakandan smoke to go do what he had to do. He gave us a lot of trust."

For the other three episodes, Harris confirms they had an abundance of ideas to choose from that had to be whittled down due to the shorter order. "We were firing on all cylinders making up stuff, and then money, time and reality makes you focus and harness what we got," he says of their final cut ideas.

"We picked our favourites of our favourites. I would say they're a love letter to some of my favourite movies. If you like *Conan The Barbarian*, if you like *Gladiator*, if you like Jackie Chan movies, if you like *Terminator*, if you like *Predator*, they're going to serve a bit to that all over the place."

As to the look of the series, Harris says he was able to observe the other Marvel Animation series as they developed, and that helped him create a unique aesthetic for *Eyes Of Wakanda*.

"I had a very specific philosophy I wanted to do, which is I wanted to look now and build backwards," Harris explains. "Wakanda is 10,000 years old, so in the mythological world, they're the most African culture in Africa because they've been African longer than everybody. What I was trying to do is [ask], 'What kind of things can you see that would have been the beginning of and influenced out, but are not the same thing?' It was an interesting thought experiment to pursue.

"All that being said, I wanted to be honest to the artistic conceit and also be honest to the cultural designs that we were inspired by," he continues. "Also, to take advantage of – as much as our subject matter can – the ability for animation to enhance and indulge in reality. The cultural designs are very pushed. People don't just look like generic people. If you see someone who's from the Mediterranean, they look like they're from the Mediterranean, or South Africa, or Ethiopia. We really wanted to make sure that these different cultures read in everything we designed."

To get there, Harris looked to the work of very specific artists like illustrator Dean Cornwell. "He is under-celebrated, but an amazing artist, so he was a big part of it. Also, Ernie Barnes, who is a staple of the African-American community. He was the forebear of a very specific aesthetic that spoke to African body language, proportions and pushing motion, even in static images. Another one who is not as well-known is Charles Bibbs."

Harris then hired Craig Elliott, the man he calls "a painter's painter", as his production designer. "He just has such a mind for understanding and breaking things apart," Harris explains. "He's an art physicist. Then we also looked to the Marvel Studios visual development department with Ryan Meinerding helping us and guiding us. Anytime I got a blessing from him, I'm like, 'High five, everybody. Pour some Gatorade on me!'"

Assisting him in landing the first season's animation order was co-director John Fang. "He was my Supervising Director, and he co-directed an episode with me," Harris details. "And then he directed an episode."

> **"The first episode dumps us into the closing of the Western Bronze Age"**

After carrying this idea for the better part of a decade, Harris is delighted that *Eyes Of Wakanda* now exists, and that the final product reflects what he had imagined all those years ago in his humble pitches to Feige and Coogler.

"They're all my baby," Harris says with pride for all four episodes. "I boarded all of them, and I did concept paintings and paint-overs and animation sketch-overs and keyframes. I was 10 toes in, all the way through," he says of his passionate involvement. "All of them do something different. They're all my love letters to all my favourite films."

Harris hopes that the audience loves what they've put together, because he and his writers have a pile of unproduced ideas they hope to return to in future seasons. "There are always more stories," he confirms.

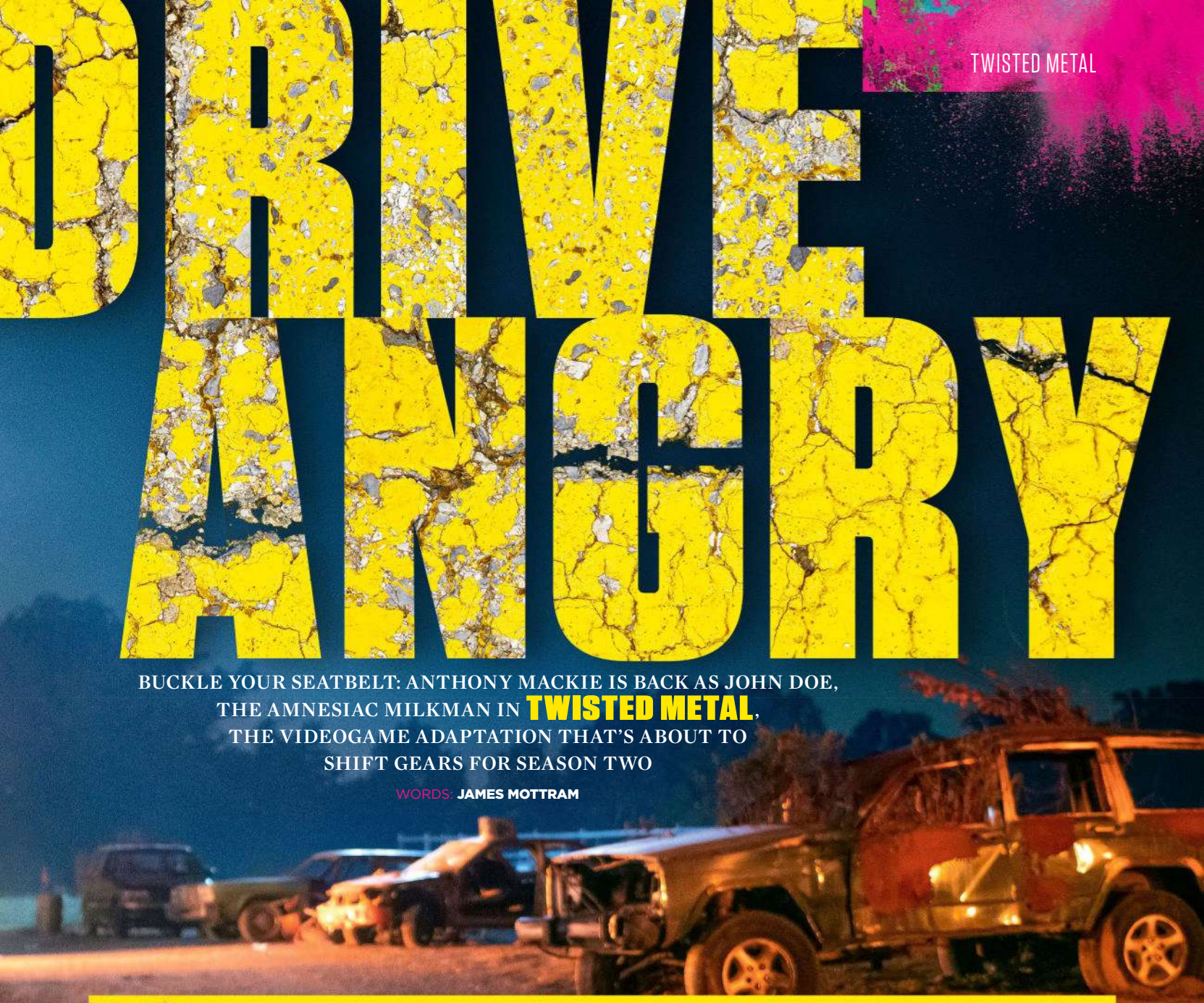
"No artist, no writer, no anybody ever does too little when it comes to creativity," he laughs. "I've never seen anyone turn in the script and go, 'It just wasn't long enough!' So yeah, we definitely have more in the tank. And it's Marvel. There's always more."

Eyes Of Wakanda is on Disney+ from 27 August.

DRIVE ANGRY

BUCKLE YOUR SEATBELT: ANTHONY MACKIE IS BACK AS JOHN DOE, THE AMNESIAC MILKMAN IN TWISTED METAL, THE VIDEOGAME ADAPTATION THAT'S ABOUT TO SHIFT GEARS FOR SEASON TWO

WORDS: **JAMES MOTTRAM**



SEPTEMBER 2024. A VAST former airplane hangar, in the north of Toronto, Canada, is today playing host to very different modes of transport. Close to the office space where *SFX* is ensconced, a giant two-wheeled monster vehicle is being craned into view. A short hop away, in the busy chop shop, purple and green VW Beetles, a tow truck with a spiked ball on its tow arm, and an ice cream van sit patiently. Outside on the concourse, a rust-covered white Audi TT awaits. That's *Twisted Metal*, right there.

A PlayStation and PC videogame series heavy on vehicular combat and machine-oriented mayhem, *Twisted Metal* was always ripe for a screen adaptation. Released in 2023, the 10-episode first season roared audiences to a post-apocalyptic America, where cities have become walled-off fortresses in an effort to keep out the psychotic criminals that patrol the lawless outer regions. A mix of high-octane action and ribald comedy then. Or as showrunner Michael Jonathan Smith puts it: "*Mad Max* meets *The Simpsons*."

GAME PLAY

There's no better way to describe this one-off TV show – which is driven by Anthony Mackie's John Doe, the amnesiac "milkman" who we first saw on a wild cross-country run to retrieve a package from New Chicago. "Season one was a really good show, a really good jump-off point, because there's nothing like this on TV," says the actor, dressed in Nike high-tops, cargo pants and a maroon t-shirt, when he pops over for a chat. "Every season you want to build on the season before it. And this season definitely builds on season one, because The Tournament is insane."

Ah yes, The Tournament. The centrepiece to season two, this high-stakes demolition derby is hosted by the mysterious (but rather dapper) Calypso, played by Anthony Carrigan. With an ultimate prize on offer, Mackie's John and Quiet (Stephanie Beatriz), the wastelands survivor he teamed up with previously, go behind the wheel in what feels like a madcap upgrade on *Death Race 2000*. It ain't gonna be pretty. "Well, people die," says the garrulous Smith, half-hidden underneath a green baseball cap. "That's the biggest trick."

The showrunner knows a thing or two about crafting tournaments after working on Netflix martial arts series *Cobra Kai*. "I wrote a lot of tournament episodes when I wrote on that show, which I loved," he says. Switching out karate kids for cars truly raised the stakes, though, as questions had to be asked. "How do we make it bigger? And then what is the twist on each round? What is the thing that you're not expecting? What is the thing that makes it a little more dangerous, that makes it a little more deadly?" →

Then there's the rogues' gallery of characters John will face off with, including Mayhem (Saylor Bell Curda), Mr Grimm (Richard de Klerk) and Vermin (Lisa Gilroy). Chief among them is Axel – owner of the aforementioned two-wheeled monster, or War Wheel, that's just been dragged into the studio hangar space – playing by man mountain Michael James Shaw (aka Corvus Glaive in *Avengers: Endgame*). "Axel is probably one of the wildest characters in the history of videogames," grins Mackie.

An avowed fan of the game ("I love *Twisted Metal: Black*. That was my OG game"), Smith started out season two prep by thinking about who he wanted to see on screen. "You're having a tournament, so who are the heavy hitters that people are going to expect, and who are the people that you're not going to expect? We actually spent a lot of days in the writers' room talking about who are the people we need to see, who are the people that we want to surprise the audience with. And we have a lot of really fun surprises."

Today's scene – coming around episode seven of 12 in season two – is a crucial one, as Calypso sets up the idea of The Tournament. "This is the calm before the storm," says Smith, gesturing towards the auto shop where John is currently squaring up to the bare-chested Axel. Bedecked with cobwebs, the cavernous interior is filled with hubcaps, tyres, exhausts, air cylinders and car batteries. More deadly equipment – including rocket launchers and pistols – lines the walls. Vermin's van, The Roach Coach – minus the huge cockroach prop that rests on its roof – sits close by.

With Smith pulling from the deep well of the franchise's characters, as well as inventing new ones, it's going to feel very different from season one. With one exception. Sweet Tooth, the psychotic clown, is back. Played by American pro-wrestler Joe Seanoa and voiced by Will Arnett, this fan-favourite hasn't changed, thankfully. He's still the "embodiment of chaos", says Seanoa. "Whenever he shows up, the whole world manages to flip on its head. [He's] somebody that adheres to his own rules, his own code."

TOP GEAR

Like last season, Mackie has been working with stunt driver Aaron Parker to hone his driving skills. "He knows cars," purrs Mackie. "We were out there on the runway and we were doing doughnuts, in cars. He's teaching me how to do figure eights around cones, how to slide the car into a park position, stuff like that that you would never use in the real world... but it's one of those things where he's taught me a lot of stuff, because he's one of the top five drift drivers in the world. So he can make a car do things that you could only dream of."

After taking on the Cap mantle in recent MCU entry *Captain America: Brave New World*, Mackie's primed for stunt work. "I'm hustling alongside him, trying to keep up," laughs Stephanie Beatriz. "He's so used to doing this from years and years on Marvel movies... he's learned from the best. I mean, his last movie was with one of the greatest action

Season two will bear witness to The Tournament.

Richard de Klerk will star as skull-faced Mr Grimm.

Stephanie Beatriz plays the fittingly brusque Quiet.

Patty Guggenheim as Raven in season two.

The new series is definitely a step up in the mayhem stakes.

JOE SEANOA

The pro wrestler has a real Sweet Tooth

Can you talk about Sweet Tooth's return?
Sweet Tooth was a goner last season, but through the miracle of regeneration and probably some illicit substances, he's back on his feet and ready to go over season two. I think that really frames up the show. Just enough absurdity to make it all make sense.

What is your make-up process like?
They roll me in a mud pit for about 15 minutes and then put me in clown pants and give me the spot-dog eye. And then I'm into the mask. So it's not incredibly intensive as some guys have it, but it's definitely a dirty job.

Will Arnett voices Sweet Tooth. How's that been?
Will's been awesome. He pretty much said, "Go out there, you know, act the hell out of the role, and I'll do my best to make the audio match."

PICTURES: PIEF WEYMAN/PEACOCK; STOCK IMAGES: SEKSANWANGJAISUK, ALEKSANDRA KONOPLIA, R_TEE, MASTER1305/GETTY

Having been glimpsed, Dollface will feature heavily.

heroes of all time, Harrison Ford. Imagine you see a really big strong bull mastiff, running at full speed. And then there's a tiny Chihuahua, trying to keep up with him next to him... that is what I feel like."

With stunt coordinator Logan Holladay (*The Fall Guy*) orchestrating the insanity, Beatriz believes we're still really at the starting gate. "The first season is the chase to establish what the world is, but the second season is the game. It's the cars beating the shit out of each other. So there's way more action." For Beatriz also? "Yeah," she says, sipping on a Coke. "I chop somebody's head off!"

The last time we saw Quiet, though, the maverick mistress had left John back at New San Francisco, while she returned to her life in the wastelands. So where are they now? "We're jumping eight months," reveals Smith. "John is still in New San Francisco. He's been training, trying to escape, trying to get back to Quiet." But as we soon learn, she has become a key member of a certain all-female gang. "Quiet... she's become a very important member of The Dolls," he continues. "That's where we meet Dollface, who is John's sister."

Played by Californian native Tiana Okoye, Dollface was glimpsed briefly at the climax of season one. But reuniting her and John poses some interesting narrative questions. "John doesn't have a memory," adds Smith, "so Dollface has all of these memories of their past, and John has none of them. How do you square that?" According to Mackie, "John's brain is forever broken. The amnesia part of the character is just who he is. So he learns more about himself and his history... but there's still stuff that he doesn't know."

As for Quiet and John, the very heart of the show, Smith compares their journey in season two to finding out that your former high-school sweetheart has moved on. "These two people really cared about each other and were torn apart, and what happens when they come back together?" adds Beatriz. "Are they still a unit? Have things changed too much? Are they still going to be the same kind of team? Is it not possible for them to connect in the same way?"

There are also some sparkling new in-series locations – helped by the fact that the production moved from steamy New Orleans to the more temperate Toronto – including Diesel City, which fans of the game will be familiar with. "We've turned it into a black market city," Smith reveals. There's no doubt, *Twisted Metal* is about to get more, well, twisted. "We're really trying to go even weirder this season," he promises. "We just want to make it look even better, feel even bigger. More cars. More characters. More comedy."

Twisted Metal is on Paramount+ from 31 July.

> **"The second season is the game. It's cars beating the shit out of each other. So there's way more action"**

Anthony Mackie returns as John Doe.

ANTHONY CARRIGAN

The American star finds his rhythm as Calypso

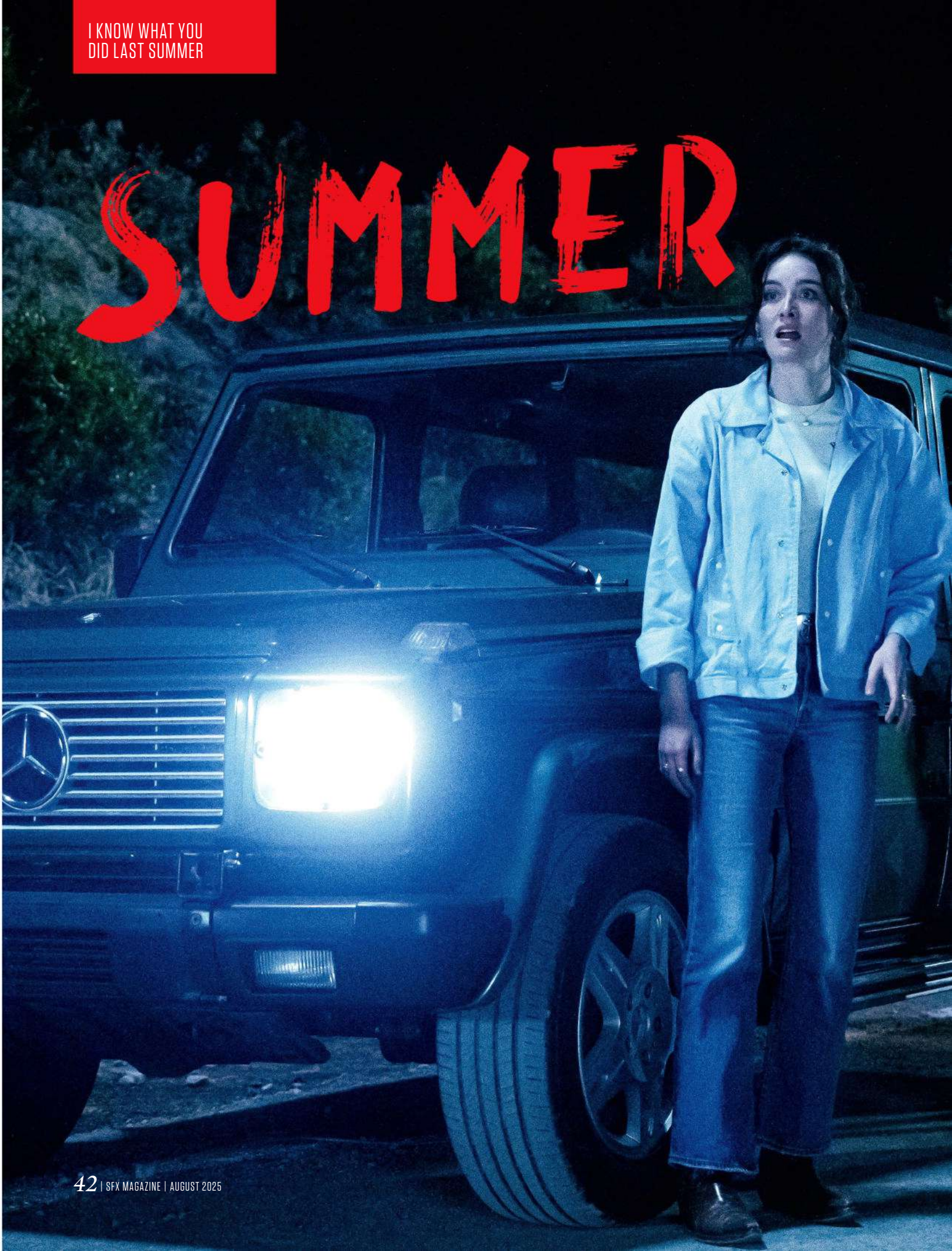
Were you a fan of the game?
I actually had played this game when I was in middle school. I think it was *Twisted Metal 3*, and I loved it. I used to go over my buddy's place every day after school and play this game. So coming full circle now.

Calypso was alluded to in season one. Did you draw from that?
I watched the first season. I thought it was great, but as soon as I read the scripts, I knew the spin that I wanted to put on it. I was excited to find my take on it.

What did you like about playing the character?
The way he's dressed and his whole look... he has flourish, and he's such a showman. The joy is putting this whole thing together, and orchestrating all of it, being in control of all of these aspects of it and seeing everyone get terrified or excited.

Vermin will be played by Lisa Gilroy.

SUMMER



SLAYCATION

I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER'S FISHERMAN RETURNS, AND THEY HAVE US HOOK, LINE AND SLASHER...

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

WITH ITS BREAKOUT CAST AND instantly iconic killer, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* secured its status as a defining slasher of the late '90s. Twenty-eight summers on, a fourth instalment is poised to terrify a new generation – though its hooks, it seems, are still embedded in the past.

Co-writer Sam Lansky has been a fan from the beginning. "Lifelong!" he tells *SFX*. "The first movie is like the GOAT for me. It's so campy, and I love it so much." He credits the 1997 film, and its 1998 sequel, *I Still Know What You Did Last Summer*, as pivotal in sparking his early love of cinema, particularly horror.

"So when I heard that there was a plan to reimagine it, I was incredibly, incredibly excited. It was something that I really wanted to be a part of."

He joined *I Know What You Did Last Summer* – the latest in a wave of legacy sequels to repurpose the original film's title – through director Jennifer Kaytin Robinson, creator of MTV's *Sweet/Vicious*. "We've known →

Inevitably, this will follow similar beats to the original.

each other socially for about 10 years, and we've developed projects together," says Lansky, who's also a contributing editor at *Time* magazine.

He co-wrote the script alongside Robinson. "We have a wonderful, deep friendship and working relationship," he says. "She's a hugely, hugely talented filmmaker."

Was there pressure in taking on one of horror's most beloved franchises? "I wouldn't say pressure," Lansky replies. "I would say responsibility. For so many people out there, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* looms quite large over an early love of movies and an early love of pop culture – and being scared and being thrilled."

Lansky was just nine when he snuck into a cinema to watch *I Still Know...* Now, helping to revive the franchise for a new generation, he says his younger self would never have believed it. "I really felt a sense of responsibility to that kid, who, in a way, stands in for all the fans of this franchise who remember it so fondly," he says. "But I tried not to let the pressure get to me!"

SLASHBACK SEQUENCE

That respect for the original shaped every step of the writing process. He rewatched the first two films repeatedly. "Particularly the first – I feel like I know every frame of it at this point," he laughs. "We did deep, deep, research, and really immersed ourselves in the world and the lore."

Lansky also dove back into the broader world of late '90s teen horror, which he considers a golden age for the genre. "I watched so many movies from that era," he says. "Some good ones, some not so good ones! You can learn a lot from even the movies that aren't the finest examples. They still have something to teach us, something to show us."

One of the most rewarding moments of the production process, the writer says, was a trip he and Robinson took to North Carolina to retrace the footsteps of the original shoot. "We had a really fun and kind of surreal couple of days," he recalls. "We went looking for the Anne Heche [playing Melissa Egan] house. Is she cutting a fish or a chicken? I can't remember. I think it's fish. Either way, she's chopping up a storm! We went in search of that house in a little town called Burgaw.

"And, oh my god, this very, very sweet man showed us around the theatre where they shot the Helen Shivers [played by Sarah Michelle Gellar] Croaker Queen set-piece." That's the historic Amuzu Theatre in Southport, gore fans. "To see it in person, having seen the sequence so many times, was really special."

The visit helped shape the tone and direction of their own entry in the saga. "Thinking about how to creatively take what is so iconic and so beloved about the original movie that fans, including us, love so much, and transpose it into this new generation and the moment that we're in," he explains.

Asked how consciously they approached slasher tropes – especially given how the original *I Know* was famously spoofed in *Scary Movie* (2000) – Lansky says the aim was to both embrace and subvert them.

"You want to do it all. When I look forensically at what makes a slasher work, there are these dopamine buttons that you want to push, of tension and release. You don't want to avoid those altogether; you want to hit them because they're really, really fun for viewers. But I also think you don't want to feel predictable. You want an element of surprise. You want things to feel subversive. You want to catch people off-guard.

"It was about satisfying the things that you know you want going into a movie like this, subverting things that maybe feel overly familiar," he adds. "Like, we've seen this before, so let's find a fresh way into it – and then just dialling everything up to 100."

From day one, the team wanted to create a film that *demanded* to be seen on the big screen. "A big, theatrical event where you grab your friends, get the popcorn, scream, laugh, and have the full experience," Lansky grins. "That was such a driving force for us – really wanting this to feel big. And if you want it to feel big, you've got to push some buttons. You've got to surprise people by pushing buttons they didn't even know they wanted pushed."

TOTALLY HOOKED

I Know What You Did Last Summer opens much like the original: a group of friends inadvertently cause a fatal car accident and make a pact to cover it up rather than face the consequences. But in the sleepy fishing village of Southport, secrets never stay buried for long. A year later, the past resurfaces in the form of a hook-wielding Fisherman who knows *exactly* what they did last summer. If they want to survive what's next, they're going to need help.

Enter the legacy characters. Freddie Prinze Jr reprises his role as Ray Bronson, joined once again by Jennifer Love Hewitt as the original final girl, Julie James. According to Lansky, Julie represents "a deep and emotionally significant" part of Hewitt's life, and it was important to her that this continuation did the character justice.

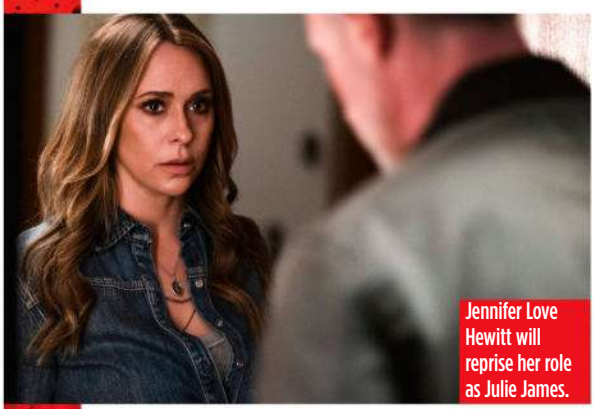
"The thing that really struck me about working with Jen was just how deep her commitment was to making sure that this really, really satisfied the fans," he adds. "Those who have grown with her over so many years and really, really care."

The last time we saw Julie, she was being dragged under her bed by the Fisherman – a jarring final jump scare in *I Still Know...* that, like the mirror-shattering climax of the first film, left fans questioning what was real and what wasn't.

Lansky reflects on the "impressionistic, dreamlike quality" of those scenes, noting that there was considerable discussion about how best to acknowledge them. "They're very open to interpretation, and I leave it in the fans' hands whether those moments are a subconscious manifestation of her fears or whether they're actually happening in flesh-and-blood reality.

"I think you'll find that where we pick up with Julie, she's out from under a bed. I'll say that!"

The new cast features Jonah Hauer-King – fresh from his turn as Conrad Clark in *Doctor*



Jennifer Love Hewitt will reprise her role as Julie James.

PICTURES: BROOK RUSHTON/COLUMBIA PICTURES. STOCK IMAGES: ROBERTO ADRIAN/ISTOCK, REVEL STOCKART/GETTY.

A new Fisherman will be taking their bow.

Expect the kill count to be just as high as first time round.

Southport will once again be terrorised by a revenge-seeking reaper.

Expect to have your proconceptions turned upside down.

“That hook the Fisherman is working with is no joke. That hook is vicious!”

Who – as Milo, and *Glass Onion*’s Madelyn Cline as Danica. Taking the lead is *Bodies Bodies Bodies* star Chase Sui Wonders, playing Ava. But is she stepping into the role of the franchise’s new final girl? Lansky isn’t saying – and firmly steers us away from using that label altogether.

“What I will say is that there’s beautiful symmetry and connection between Ava as a character and Julie as a character,” he offers. “At the same time, Ava is her own person. The character feels very distinct and fully realised, just like Julie did back then, and still does when you see her on screen now. Getting to watch them forge that connection, after seeing it in our imaginations and reading it on the page, was really special.”

Lansky likens Wonders’s screen presence to what Hewitt represented for his own generation, and believes she’ll resonate just as strongly with today’s teenage viewers. “She is an absolute movie star,” he says. “So unbelievably magnetic, so smart, and so cool”.

But will Ava keep her cool when she comes face to face with the Fisherman? Reinventing the slasher as a “nastier and scarier” villain was “hugely, deeply fun,” Lansky says.

“The Fisherman is not messing around – the Fisherman is not here to fish!” he emphasises. “The Fisherman has other things on their agenda. That hook the Fisherman is working with this time is no joke. That hook is *vicious*!”

Lansky promises the Fisherman’s (despite the name, he’s tactfully avoiding pronouns) kills will be more brutal than ever. “Everything is a lot gnarlier,” he says. “I think even the trailer gives a clear sense of that. We really wanted to push – just push everything to the max.”

That heightened sense of threat is matched by a richer mythology. The writers relished the chance to weave the lore of the Fisherman, and the original massacre, into the fabric of Southport, and into the lives of Julie and Ray.

“There’s a creativity and an inventiveness to the Fisherman’s master design which, in time, is revealed,” he teases. “I think it’s really fun and really satisfying. I’m excited for people to see that.”

The new film connects to earlier entries – including the 2006 direct-to-video sequel *I’ll Always Know What You Did Last Summer* and the short-lived 2021 TV reboot – through what Lansky describes as “a thematic connective tissue” that firmly roots it within a larger, canonical world. “We really focused on the Julie and Ray piece of it, which drives so much of those first two movies, and bringing them back – that was the primary force.

“Now, there are some Easter eggs,” the writer continues. “There are some surprises. There are things that fans who really love those movies will recognise, find familiar. There’s one joke in the middle of the movie, a Ray line, that absolutely makes me howl with laughter every time I see it, because it’s a callback to one of the first two films. Fans who’ve stuck with the franchise through every version will find plenty to enjoy.”

Would Lansky return to Southport for another summer of scares? There’s no hesitation. “Hell yes! I would love to be invited back for another dance at the party,” he grins. “It was absolutely the ride of a lifetime.”

I Know What You Did Last Summer is in cinemas from 18 July.

Freddie Prinze Jr is another returning face from the original.

WRITER/DIRECTOR ZACH CREGGER FOLLOWS SURPRISE HIT BARBARIAN WITH AN EVEN TWISTIER HORROR EVENT MOVIE. MEET THE MAN BEHIND *WEAPONS*, WHICH COULD BE THE SCARIEST FILM OF THE YEAR...

WORDS: **MATT MAYTUM**

PROJECT RUNAWAY

WEAPONS MIGHT BE GAINING TRACTION AS a contender for the scariest movie of the year – thanks to some viral marketing and mystery-shrouded trailers – but writer/director Zach Cregger is level-headed when it comes to that buzz.

"Part of me is like, 'Oh God, I hope it doesn't disappoint people," he tells *SFX*, "because I'm a human and you never want anything to get too hyped. But also, it's fucking scary. Everyone I've shown it to, I always kind of qualify it: 'This is not even really a horror movie, it's more of a mystery thriller...' and then every time it ends, people are like, 'What the fuck are you talking about, this is not a horror movie?! This *is* a horror movie!' So, yeah, it is scary."

Managing expectations is tricky in these circumstances. When Cregger wrote, directed and released the twisty, twisted horror *Barbarian* in 2022, it slipped into cinemas to surprise genre fans. Beginning with a young woman arriving at a double-booked Airbnb, it spun out from there with some audacious rug pulls and tonal shifts. Made for a reported $4.5 million, it took 10 times its budget thanks to strong reviews and an element of must-see mystery.

Following that success, Cregger – previously best known for his work in comedy – became one of horror's great new hopes, and when he had another script to take to market, it sparked an all-out bidding war between major Hollywood studios, with Warner Bros subsidiary New Line Cinema ultimately winning, and Cregger scoring a payday, budget and a guaranteed theatrical release. "The bidding war was very exciting," says Cregger. "It was also very stressful, believe it or not. No one wants to hear me whine about a bidding war, and I won't. But it's not all just a super-fun time. It was a high-pressure 24 hours and it got very intense."

CHILDREN BEHAVE

While that pressure could have easily been overwhelming, the circumstances around the writing of *Weapons* prevented Cregger from being distracted by the weight of following up a big hit. In part, it's because it comes from an extremely personal place. "I wrote this in an incredibly bad time, where I had lost someone very, very close to me in a really sudden tragedy," he explains. "I was in such an emotionally charged space that I wrote it in a big vomit to just feel these feelings. So there was no part of this creative process of the writing where I was thinking about [it being] a follow-up. I didn't have bandwidth to think about that." →

PICTURES: QUANTRELL COLBERT/WARNER BROS. TCD/PROD DB / ALAMY

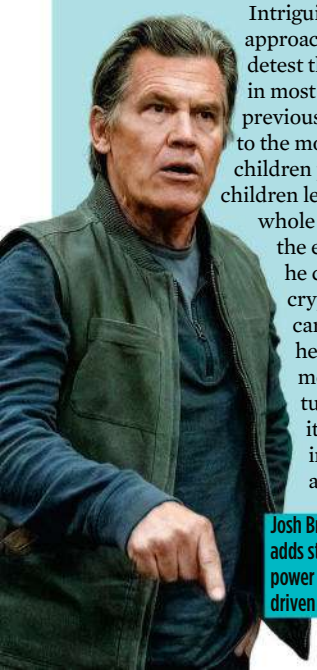
Just as he did on *Barbarian*, Cregger began his *Weapons* screenplay with no idea where he was going. "The first line of the movie is, 'This is a true story that happened in my hometown two years ago.' I'm writing that like, 'I don't even know what story she's gonna tell, but let's just find out.'" That starting point, which you'll know if you've seen the spine-freezing trailer, is that one Wednesday night in the small, unassuming town of Maybrook, at precisely 2:17am, 17 children inexplicably awoke, left their houses, and ran away into the night. Speeding off into the dark with arms outstretched almost like they were playing aeroplanes, they disappeared.

"Stephen King has this great analogy in *On Writing*," says Cregger. "It's just his advice to other writers and he says, 'You are a paleontologist. And you are unearthing a dinosaur skeleton, one bone at a time, and you don't know what the dinosaur is going to be.' That is such a liberating way to write. You get to just be a kid and have fun. As a little kid plays with GI Joes is kind of the way I write a script."

Intensifying that premise further, the 17 missing children were all from teacher Justine Gandy's (Julia Garner) school class. Every child but one in her class ran away. Of course, this raises a great many questions in the local community, and the ire of distressed parents, including Josh Brolin's perturbed patriarch. As it's only her class affected, suspicions arise.

"It's like, 'Why just your class? You're either negligent or you're complicit,'" says Cregger. "She is feeling very correctly that the entire community is aimed at her. So the movie begins weeks after the kids have gone missing, and her life is fucked. The loudest voice, the loudest antagonist is Josh's character, whose child is missing. So we start where both of these characters are trying to solve the same mystery, but Julia's trying to solve it to get her life back and Josh is trying to solve it to get his child back. They're pitted against each other, and then it goes from there."

Intriguingly, for those who like to approach twisty thrillers cold and detest the omnipresence of spoilers in most modern trailers, Cregger has previously assured that there's more to the movie than the missing children premise. "The engine of the children leaving is the engine of the whole movie, but the mystery is not the engine of the whole movie," he clarifies, albeit somewhat cryptically. "I've got to be so careful about spoilers, but here's what I will say. This movie has more twists and turns than *Barbarian*, but what it doesn't do, very intentionally, is I never abandon the audience."



Josh Brolin adds star power as a driven parent.

Julia Garner plays the object of the town's ire.

As far as openings go, it's hard to forget.

Weapons is Zach Cregger's follow-up to *Barbarians*.

Weapons embodies every parent's worst fear.

FEAR FACTOR

Also lying in wait to surprise the audience is the extent of the wider cast, and how they're deployed. Cregger pinpoints Paul Thomas Anderson's ensemble drama *Magnolia* as the key reference point. "There's a couple of names that aren't in the cast announcement, and there's a couple of [actors] that I think people have not realised what a big deal their characters will be," he says. "That's great, and I probably shouldn't even say that, but there are some actors that... it's amazing what they do... There are seven main characters in this movie and the trailer, we're leaning into two of those. But there are truly seven main characters."

One actor who won't be in *Weapons* is Pedro Pascal, who was cast in Brolin's role before scheduling conflicts with *The Fantastic Four: First Steps* took him out of the equation. "There was a little bit of a tweak," explains Cregger when *SFX* asks if the character was changed for the new actor. "There were a couple of things that I worked out with Pedro that fell off when I started working with Josh, but nothing major. They were just little [tweaks]. You have to tailor it to the actor to some degree."

Like *Barbarian*, *Weapons*' premise is rooted in an all too believable fear ("I think the scariest stuff is the most grounded"), but Cregger promises a fun viewing experience

STOCK IMAGES: KITTISAK_TARAMAS/GETTY

Cary Christopher plays Alex, the one kid left behind.

What significance does the time have?

> **“There are some actors that people have not realised what a big deal their characters will be”**

despite the heavy subject matter, thanks to the aforementioned writing process that follows where the story takes him.

“I would let it be disturbing if I felt like that’s what it wanted to be, and there’s disturbing things in this movie for sure,” he says. “But it’s mostly really fun. It’s a roller coaster ride; there are laughs all the way through the movie and it is not a brutal misery slog... I like fun horror. I think horror should be fun.”

Horror-head Cregger cites *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Shining* and *Hereditary* among his favourites, and considers the genre to be in a good place. “It feels like the things that people are going to the theatres for are horror movies and big, crazy superhero movies,” he considers.

“There’s not a lot of room for other stuff, which is sad. But I happen to love horror from a really authentic place, so it’s working for me. I’m happy that I get to play in that space. But I do look forward to a time where theatres allow for more than just horror and superhero fare.”

Weapons is hitting cinemas soon, and that theatrical release was “crucial” for Cregger. “I love the theatrical experience, especially with horror. It’s one of those things where you get into this communal energy field, this wavelength that you all share, and suddenly the experience is heightened in a way that is impossible to have when you’re watching at home.”

Having screened the film for test audiences, he couldn’t be more excited to unleash it on the public this summer. “It was the best,” he beams. “It was fucking awesome, and I am so excited for it to come out in theatres so I can have that experience again.”

Weapons is in cinemas from 8 August.

GAME ON

Zach Cregger on his Resident Evil movie

Cregger’s next feature after *Weapons* will be a new adaptation of the beloved videogame franchise. “I am a gigantic *Resident Evil* game fan,” he tells *SFX*. “I’ve played them all. I don’t know how many times I’ve just looped [*RE4*] again and again. I just love it. I’m definitely not trying to be completely obedient to the lore of the games; I’m trying to tell a story that just feels authentic to the experience you get when you play the games. I don’t think I’m breaking any major rules, but I also recognise that no matter what I do, people are going to come for me online. So all I want to do is just make a really good movie and tell a story that’s compelling. I know that I’m gonna be happy with the movie, and hopefully other people will, too.”

Cregger also had a slightly different approach to his usual see-where-the-writing-takes-him style. “Only, though, because I had the idea for the movie and it was such a simple idea that I saw the beginning and the end of the movie in the same moment. So I had this bird’s eye view right away where I was like, ‘This is what the movie should be...’ It was different, but it was still very spontaneous. I will also say, I’ve never seen a movie like it. It doesn’t jump around like *Weapons* and *Barbarian*, but it is still unto itself.”

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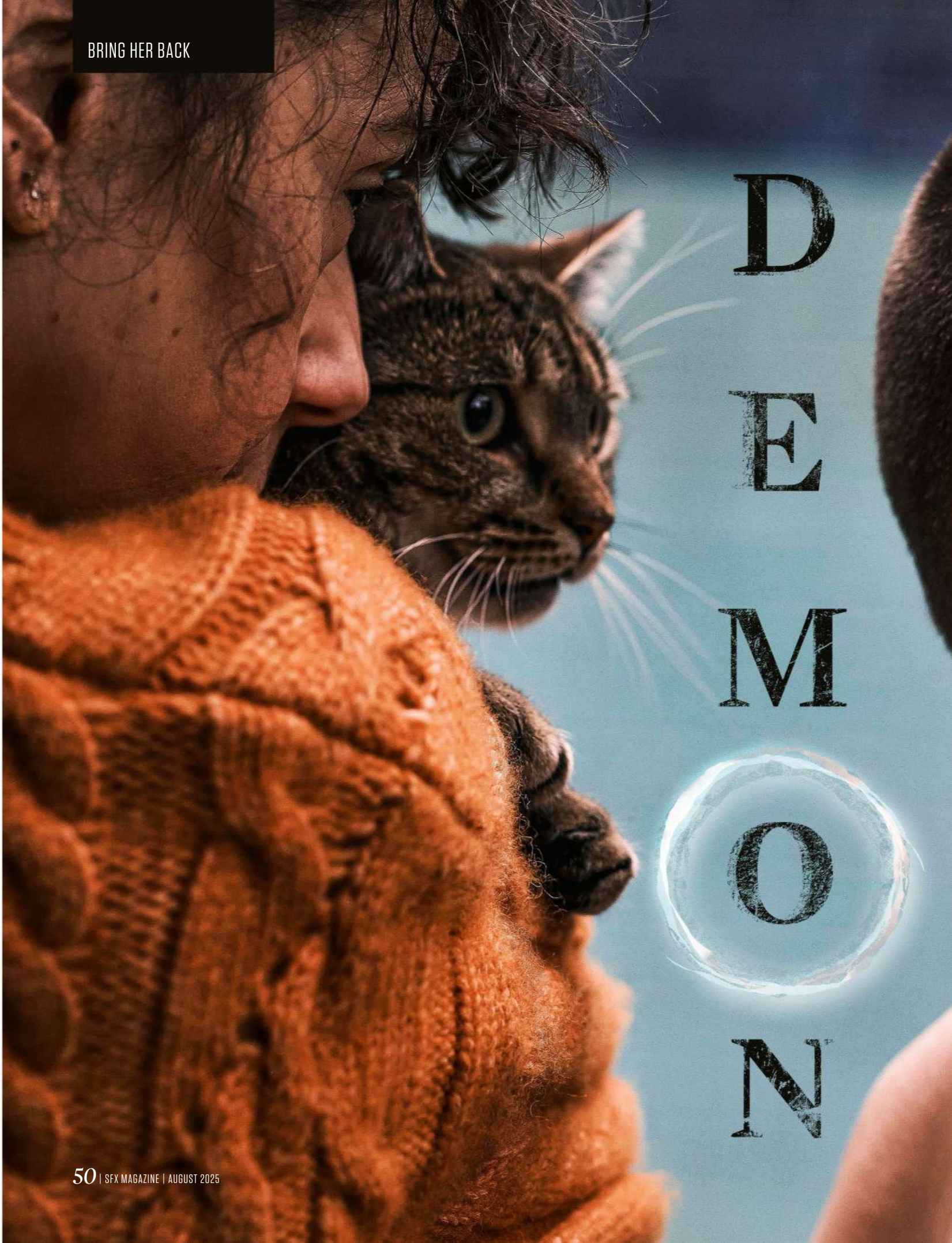
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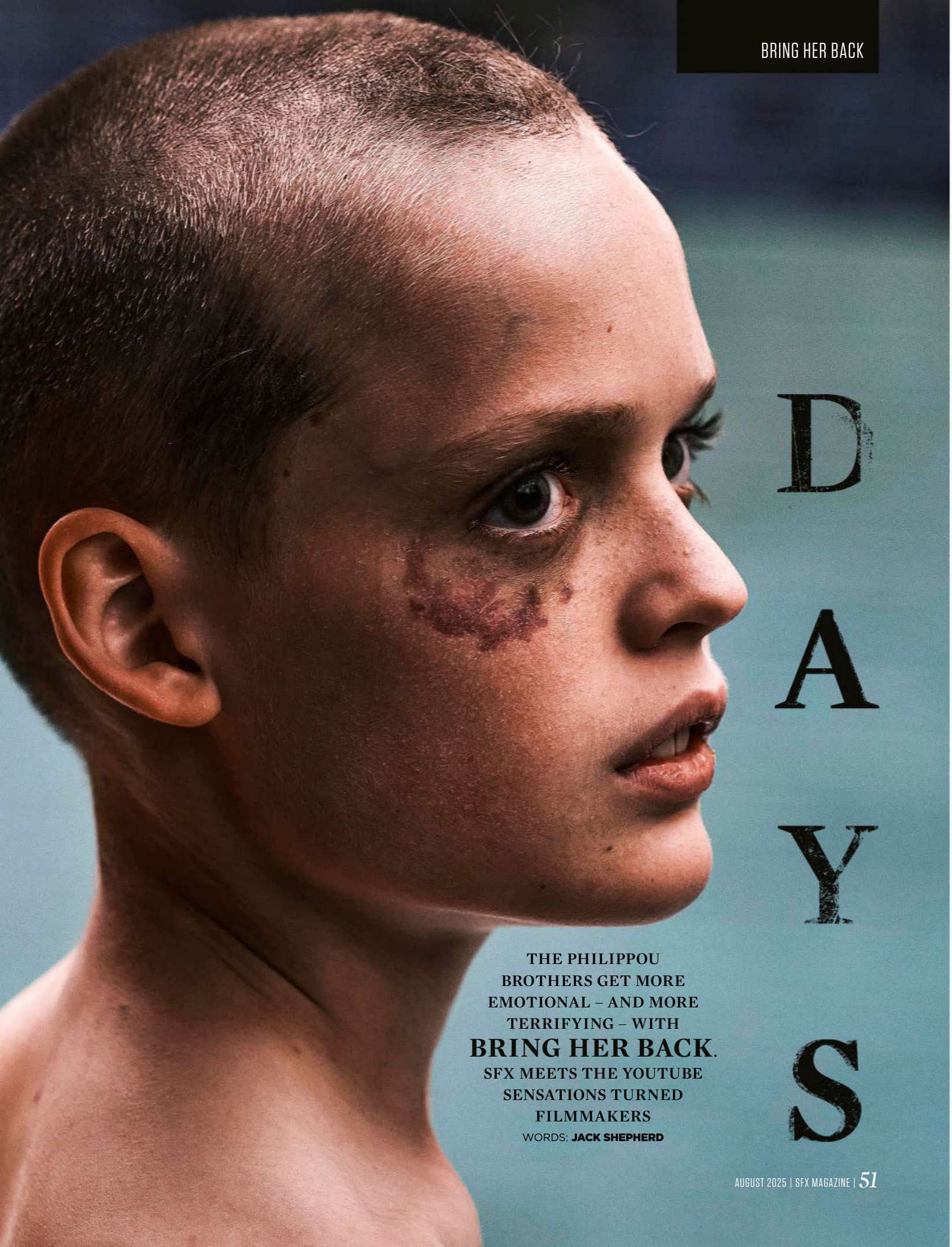


DAYS

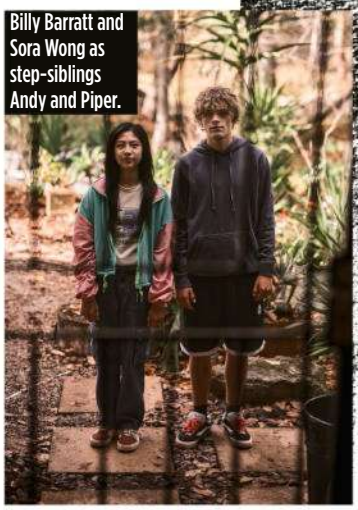
THE PHILIPPOU BROTHERS GET MORE EMOTIONAL – AND MORE TERRIFYING – WITH BRING HER BACK. SFX MEETS THE YOUTUBE SENSATIONS TURNED FILMMAKERS

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

Danny and Michael Philippou are a YouTube success story.

Sally Hawkins brings star power as a mother twisted by grief.

There is more to both Laura and Oliver than meets the eye.



Billy Barratt and Sora Wong as step-siblings Andy and Piper.

AFTER THE RELEASE OF their box office sensation *Talk To Me*, Danny and Michael Philippou had a choice. The twin brothers, previously best known for their wildly successful YouTube channel RackaRacka, were offered a plethora of projects, including a big-budget reboot of *Street Fighter*.

"It was a crossroads moment when *Street Fighter* was on the table," Danny, who writes the duo's scripts, tells *SFX*. "Part of us was like, 'Oh my God, how fun would it be to just fucking send it on these massive set-pieces?' [The studio Legendary] were so down for everything, and they were collaborating in such a beautiful way. But then there was also this really personal film, where it's completely our story and our own world. It was the hardest decision to make, people were like, 'What the fuck?' But the idea of making our own characters was always going to draw us in more."

So the Philippous reluctantly put *Street Fighter* aside and began assembling *Bring Her Back*, a film thematically similar to *Talk To Me* – itself a deeply affecting horror about an embalmed hand that allowed holders to speak to spirits – yet offering a deeper exploration of grief and trauma.

The story follows siblings Andy (*Invasion*'s Billy Barratt) and his low-sighted sister Piper (newcomer Sora Wong) after their dad accidentally falls to his death in the shower. Left without a guardian, Piper and Andy are adopted by Sally Hawkins's former child therapist Laura, who lost her own partially-sighted daughter. When the duo arrive at Laura's secluded house in the woods, they meet her other adopted son, Oliver, played by Jonah Wren Phillips, a shaven-headed boy who can't speak and eats anything (more on that later).

Of course, this being a Philippou production, things get tense quickly, with Andy trying to unravel the mystery of what's really happening at his new home. Saying too much more would spoil the fun, but know that *Bring Her Back* begins with a startling cold open that sees occultists filming themselves as they perform a terrifying ritual revolving around a visceral death by hanging, all to summon some sort of demon.

STATE OF INDEPENDENCE

"The initial inspiration for the film was our friend's little sister, who was non-sighted, and she wasn't allowed to catch the bus by herself, but she wanted to," Danny, who co-wrote the screenplay with collaborator Bill Hinzman, says. "Everyone's like, 'You can't, it's too dangerous.' But then she's like, 'I need to learn how to navigate the world on my own.' That was the first nugget."

Sitting opposite the extremely excitable brothers in a London hotel's library, *SFX* points out how that sounds more like a rich character drama than an occult-spiced horror. "The same thing happened with *Talk To Me*," Danny explains. "First, you have those characters live in their own drama film, then you put that into a horror environment and see what naturally can come out of that story. It was all about grief, so we were asking, 'How can you present grief on screen that's all encompassing, where it can eat you alive if you let it?'"

The first element that fell into place was Oliver, which then led to the creation of a demon. Next, they looked at Laura's character, who throughout the film, watches old childhood videotapes of her dead daughter. "We were like, 'What's the most fucked-up version of that?'" says Danny. "That ended up being her watching tapes of a cult doing these rituals, which we then presented in this disgusting VHS format, compared to the nice DVDs of her daughter."

> **"How can you present grief on screen, where it can eat you alive if you let it?"**

The brothers went on to create an entire mythology for the cult, including how Laura discovered the videotapes. "I love just hinting at the mythology, where people can see the clues and form together the narrative, as opposed to just giving it to them," says Michael. "The mythology, we have it etched in stone, but then we drip-feed it, so it's not over-explained, which could be frustrating for some people, but

PICTURES: INGVAR KENNE/A24

Piper (right) and Andy are fostered by Laura (left).

Jonah Wren Phillips plays troubled child Oliver.

The directors spoke highly of working with Hawkins.

if you look at *The Shining*, if you read the script, you know that Jack Torrance is a reincarnation of a person that used to be at the hotel. But they strip all that out, and you just see this photo of him at the end of the film, and you're like, 'What the fuck?' There's a lived world that people are dropped into."

As well as Stanley Kubrick's seminal horror, other inspirations include *The Exorcist*, for possession reasons, and the 1962 thriller *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane?* "It's led by a really powerful lead character actress," Michael says. "It made us want to find an actor who we would be excited to work with, which turned out to be Sally. All her films are so different, but she'd never portrayed a horror character before, and the idea of her putting her energy and that skill base into a horror character was a big inspiration point."

One scene in particular recalls another classic horror; Andy takes a shower and is visited by someone, almost *Psycho*-style. "It's fun to play with horror tropes," Danny says. "You always ask, 'How does that fit into our story?'" The pair also wanted to emphasise physical effects over CGI, saying that around 95% of the film was caught in-camera. "It's always a challenge, seeing how you can pull things off practically," Michael says.

The trickiest shot, the brothers agree, was one where a demonically-possessed Oliver starts eating a wooden tabletop counter, his teeth shattering and flying everywhere (we did tell you that he ate everything). "Jonah just did that," Michael says before Danny gets on his knees and starts pretending to gnaw on the table in front of him. "But really, 90% of the table is real, and then that bit was chocolate."

"We would call cut and Jonah would still be eating," Danny adds with a roar of laughter. →

OH, BROTHER

Billy Barratt is Andy, a young man who just wants to protect his sister

What was it about this project that made you want to sign on?

I watched RackaRacka, and loved it because it wasn't your classic YouTube star vlogging; they always had a filmmaking feel, the action sequences and everything. I was and still am a massive fan. When *Talk To Me* came out, I remember watching it at a Soho screening room, thinking "Oh, wow." I was going to be in that film, but then I couldn't make it because of Covid. They called me back for *Bring Her Back* and I ended up doing auditions, and they were like, "Andy *is* you!" Prepping for him was about finding the relationship between him and Piper. When I'm with my real brother, we have fun and jokes and we tease each other.

How did you find that connection with Sora [Wong, who plays Piper]?

It was her first job as an actress, and she killed it. It's hard when they just call action, and then suddenly you've got to pretend like you've known each other for years when you don't know anything about each other. We had three weeks in pre-production where we did a lot of walking around, linking arms, and we practised me describing what I could see to Sora, like what was on the TV. We just got on really well.

Your character goes through some big emotional ups and downs.

I've done some quite heavy roles before, when I was quite young as well. For this, the crew and the set just really matched the vibe. If it was a depressing or heavy dark scene, everyone would be quiet. Then if it was a happy scene, they'd all start cracking jokes.

And when you were up against a demon child?

I would see Aaron McLisky, our Director of Photography, bedding the camera, and at the end of a scene, he was just shocked and terrified, like, "This is a bit much, isn't it?"

Was it weird seeing Jonah [Wren Phillips] in full demon make-up?

Jonah's a really cool kid. We've got similar music tastes as well. Slowly throughout the film, they would put more and more prosthetics on him, and by the end, it was pretty crazy. It's weird and scary seeing that, but then at the same time, it's Jonah. We all know it's Jonah. And when they call cut, suddenly everything's back to normal.

Which was the hardest scene to film?

Probably the last scene, but I won't say anymore. There's obviously the emotional aspects of it, trying to be a defensive brother, because that hits you emotionally and it gets quite dark, what he has to go through. Then there's another scene that I can't talk about, with a puddle... We did that for real, and we did quite a few takes of that.

That scene was gnarly. You also have some pretty big scenes with Sally Hawkins.

Our acting coach, Miranda Harcourt, helped us break the ice. There was this thing where you hold your hands out, palms down, flat against each other, and then the other person slaps your hands, and at the same time they say a gentle "Fuck you." Then the other person does it back, but it's a bit harder and more aggressive. And then it keeps getting harder and harder, more and more aggressive. At first, it feels very personal. Sally's tough. I'm not as tough as her. I thought, "I'm just going to do it to Sally." I go, "Fuck you," and she took a minute, and I could see that she was trying to work out if that was personal or not. I thought, "Oh my God, I've just told Sally to go fuck herself, this is not good." Then she did it back and I hugged her and said, "I'm so sorry, I love you." She took it really well, and straight away that broke the ice.

There's one scene in particular where you punch a hole in some drywall out of anger, with your fist being super-close to her head.

When we got into the whole argument of that scene and the initial hit into the drywall, the emotions were high. We needed it to be like that so that it doesn't feel comfortable between the two of us, but at the same time, we also needed to stay friends by the end of the shoot. So when we did that, it was like in a boxing match, where you can be best mates, but as soon as that bell goes, you're in the ring and it's happening. As soon as action was called, we were not Billy and Sally, but Laura and Andy. And as soon as it's cut, we're good!

Can Piper's new foster mother Laura be trusted?

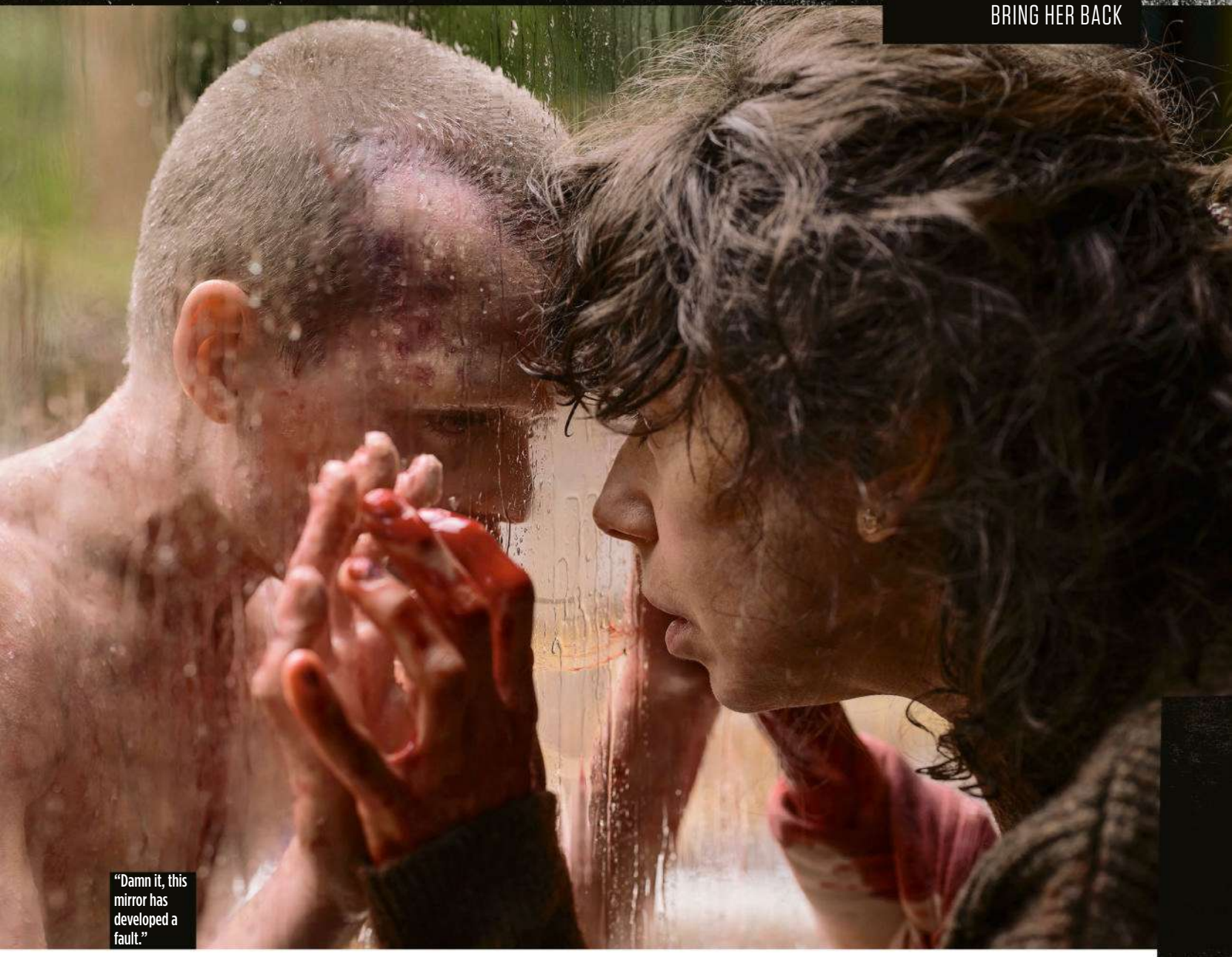
That bathroom suite isn't the only horrifying thing.

It can be tricky to find a good window cleaner.

"She believes she can bring her daughter back. She's driven by a cause you can sympathise with"

"We wanted the teeth to break in certain ways, and we put our production team and make-up teams to the test with that. Everyone was throwing their expertise into it, trying to build something that you just haven't seen before."

It's shocking, but not as disconcerting as seeing Hawkins playing someone twisted by her grief. "It was incredible, I've never had an experience like that with an actor that really went there," says Michael. "The crew were



"Damn it, this mirror has developed a fault."

scared to approach her. There's one scene where she's grabbing another character, and she's in this heightened state, she's crying, throwing herself around. She refuses to wear pads and does her own stunts. You're like, 'Oh my god, she's fucking awesome.'"

CRAZY CAT LADY

Hawkins's performance elevates *Bring Her Back*, but it's how the script empathises with her that makes it special. Elements of her character, the directors say, came from real people. "During the research phase, I had this character that I'd dress up as and talk to some really crazy occultists," Danny says. "There was this one lady who was convinced she could turn into a cat. She was taking that stuff seriously, reading spell books. Some of the stuff that they said they can do is incredible; you could go down a rabbit hole researching it.

"With some of them, the belief is so real. So we asked ourselves, 'What if it's true and the spell books work? What if these people figured out how to do it?' Then someone like Laura stumbles into something like that, and she now believes she can bring her daughter back. She's driven by a cause you can sympathise with."

For the twins, not only do the characters and the drama separate their new film from its predecessor, *Talk To Me*, but so does their approach to building tension. "We wanted to commit to a snowball, to this film spiralling out of control slowly, because our instincts would be to have it punchy like *Talk To Me*," says Michael. "It was a purposeful thing to give the film a different energy. There were so many times that we were tempted to go back to the things we know, but it was this idea of committing to the build, following a person, and controlling the pace. Even with the opening scene, it was initially this really big one-shot, like in *Talk To Me*, this ever-evolving single shot where all this insane stuff happened. That being so extreme overshadowed the drama of the first half of the movie and deflated it."

By the time the final reel plays, there's no question over how intricately the film's mystery has played out. Chances are, you will come away with more questions than answers – but don't expect answers in a sequel. "It was never about building a franchise going into this," Danny says. "I mean, I would love to do a prequel on Laura, seeing her side of everything, but that's just because Sally is so amazing. Naturally, once you really get to know a character, and you're living and breathing them for so long, you might have ideas. When I wrote *Talk To Me*, I just couldn't stop writing, and when the film was done, I was like, 'What's next?' It just kept unveiling and progressing."

A sequel to that film is coming, but the situation with *Bring Her Back* is different. "This film really felt like a full circle moment, and it's a self-contained story," Danny continues. "After *Talk To Me*, people asked, 'Why don't you do a sequel?' But this just felt right to be next."

Bring Her Back is in cinemas from 1 August.

BACK TO THE

THE SFX ARCHIVES
STRANGER THINGS
SEASON ONE

TAKE A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE AS WE CELEBRATE SEASON ONE OF STRANGER THINGS

UPSIDE DOWN

WORDS:
ADAM TANSWELL

Matthew Modine and Millie Bobby Brown.

Will Byers (Noah Schnapp): bye-bye.

SEASON ONE: THE EPISODE TITLES

CHAPTER ONE
THE VANISHING OF WILL BYERS

CHAPTER TWO
THE WEIRDO ON MAPLE STREET

CHAPTER THREE
HOLLY, JOLLY

CHAPTER FOUR
THE BODY

CHAPTER FIVE
THE FLEA AND THE ACROBAT

CHAPTER SIX
THE MONSTER

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE BATHTUB

CHAPTER EIGHT
THE UPSIDE DOWN

“I just couldn’t stop laughing. That’s what I remember from the first episode”

Step into the *SFX* interview archives for exclusive, all-new treats from past seasons of *Stranger Things*. Over the next four months, we’ll be bringing you behind-the-scenes secrets from the cast and crew, on-set stories from your Hawkins favourites, as well as interviews we’ve NEVER published before.

Collect all four features for a retrospective of the show we all know and love – one season at a time. With the final season of *Stranger Things* launching later this year, this is the perfect prep for your upcoming season five binge.

ON 15 JULY 2016, THE DUFFER Brothers unleashed a bold new television drama on Netflix. Starring Winona Ryder, David Harbour and a host of fresh-faced newcomers, *Stranger Things* introduced the masses to Demogorgons, the Mind Flayer and the marvellous mystery of the Upside Down. The coming-of-age story delicately balanced themes of supernatural horror with ’80s nostalgia, along with slivers of drama, romance and comedy – and fans flocked.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Stranger Things’ very first scene takes place in Hawkins, Indiana. It’s 6 November 1983 and a star-filled sky fills the screen before the camera pans down to an exterior shot of Hawkins National Laboratory for the US Department of Energy.

Inside, fluorescent tube lights flicker in a hallway before a heavy door crashes open, an alarm sounds and a man in a white gown bolts out. There’s panic on his face as he races to an industrial-sized lift, repeatedly pushing the call button and eventually jumping inside – only to look up and realise that whatever was in pursuit is now above him, ready to pounce.

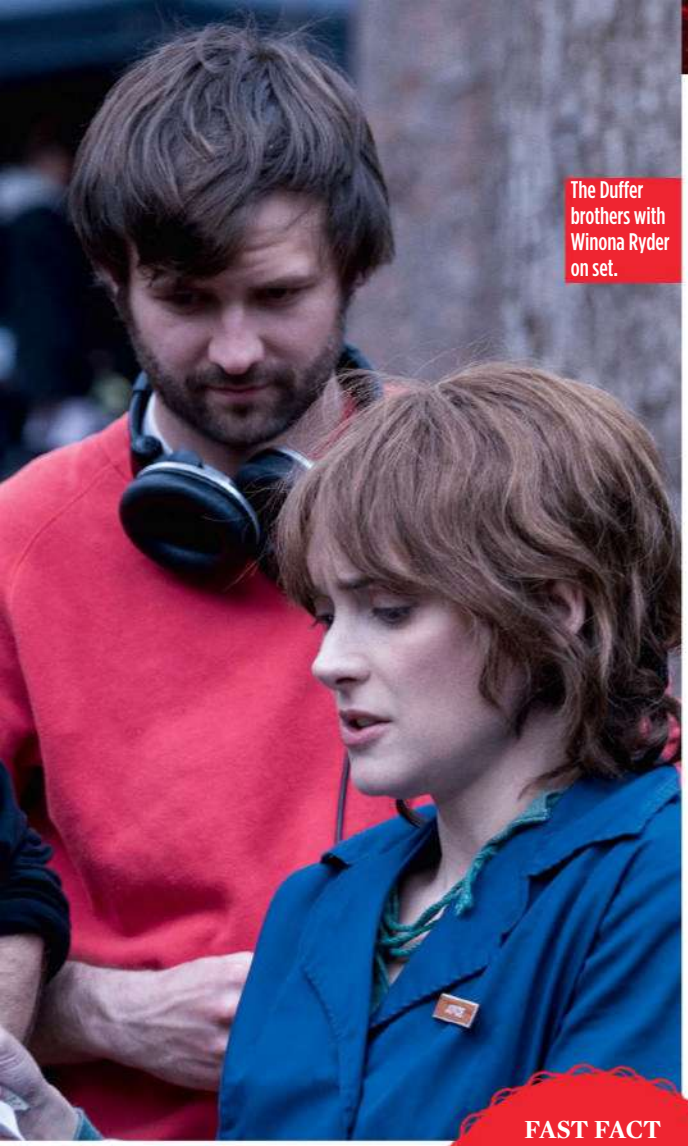
It’s on! Welcome to the wonderful retro world of conspiracy theories, science fiction and the slickest gang of bike-riding youngsters you’ll ever meet; welcome to season one of *Stranger Things*.

Over the past decade, Screen Gems Studios in Atlanta (now known as Cinespace Studios Atlanta) has served as the main home for the show. Most of the interior sets were built here – including the basement of the Wheeler house where the boys meet up to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. What did the child actors remember about shooting their very first scenes? “The first episode, we could not stop laughing,” said Caleb McLaughlin, speaking to *SFX* in 2017. “I don’t know why. It was like there was laughing gas in the air. I just couldn’t stop laughing. That’s basically what I remember from the first episode.”

Executive producer and director Sean Levy admits the chemistry in the cast was undeniable – and the giggles were non-stop. According to Levy: “That’s the blessing and the curse of this cast we put together. These are authentic, grounded kids and they’re going to laugh. If that’s the price you pay for the reality they bring on screen, then that’s pretty much worth it.”

Today, it’s a given that Netflix shows typically launch at the same time across the globe. It’s usually midnight on the west coast of the USA, which means 3am on the east coast and 8am in the UK. When all eight episodes of

PICTURES: NETFLIX. STOCK IMAGES: NOAH KEATING / 500PX / ANTON PETRUS / ANITOPHOTO/JIOJIO / UMER IQBAL/GETTY.


The Duffer brothers with Winona Ryder on set.

Eleven is, reasonably enough, quite peckish.

Charlie Heaton (Jonathan) and Natalia Dyer (Nancy).

A teensy-tiny Finn Wolfhard gets some direction.

FAST FACT

In early versions of the script, the supernatural story was set in Montauk, New York, and nearby Long Beach. To reflect this setting, the show's original title was Montauk. The fictional town of Hawkins came later, along with the title change to *Stranger Things*.

Joyce Byers doesn't know the half of it yet.

Jim Hopper (David Harbour) is also clueless.

the first season of *Stranger Things* dropped in July 2016, many of the actors excitedly stayed up late to watch the entire series in one sitting. The first two episodes were screened for the cast and crew on set in Atlanta, but they hadn't seen the remainder of the season.

"I was in New Jersey," recalled a 14-year-old Gaten Matarazzo. "I started at three in the morning and I went all the way through to noon. That's commitment." Caleb McLaughlin did the same. "After that, I didn't go to sleep," the young actor admitted. "I went out riding bikes with my friends."

Millie Bobby Brown was driving to Lake Tahoe when the first season premiered on Netflix. "It was all really chill, but then I just saw my Instagram followers going up," she explained. "I was, like, 'What is happening right now?' All of a sudden, I got text message after text message in the group chat – with Gaten saying things like, 'I'm crying right now.' [When she started to watch the show] I skipped to episode eight first, because I was so excited about eight. Then I went backwards."

Strong word of mouth pushed the show into the vernacular and thrust the cast into the spotlight – but the showrunners weren't always convinced they had a hit on their hands. "It is hard," revealed Levy. "When we were making this thing, there was no sense that people would watch it in big numbers. We just knew that it felt cool to us. Above all, we were just doing right by this creation from the Duffers' hive mind.

"There was a lot on social media. We just felt it permeate the culture really quickly – and I remember it started that Saturday. We were, like, 'Oh wait, people are watching it. People are digging it.'"

Despite social media going into overdrive, the Duffers were worried – especially with little to no adverts actively promoting the new show. "People seem to think we had a ton of advertising compared to other shows," explained Matt Duffer, speaking to *SFX* in 2017. "We were all freaked out because there was nothing, but Netflix warned us.

"They said, 'We are not going to advertise this; not like a big movie, so don't freak out. That doesn't mean we don't care about your show.' They stayed true to their word. There was nothing."

"It is interesting, they don't need that opening weekend," continued Ross Duffer. "It doesn't matter to them, but it shows they were right, in that it just snowballed by word-of-mouth. But it was hard for us. It freaked all of us out." →

Woah, is that a cool calculator watch? Like, radical!

Nancy catches up with some hot locker room chat.

Joyce gets into the spirit of *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*.

Boys keep swinging... baseball bats, mainly.

Mind you, the girls are pretty handy with a bat, too.

SEALED WITH A KISS

Finn Wolfhard was fully prepared to film the kiss scene between Mike and Eleven at the end of season one. "That day, Finn brought in 10 packs of Tic Tacs," laughed Caleb McLaughlin. "He had lip balm and everything!"

David Harbour remembered this well. "I have a friend who's on a very popular television show," he told us. "He's been doing it for a million years. Well, we were doing a play together at the time and it was three weeks before the show came out. I was walking around New York City and there are telephone booths and buses with *House Of Cards* and *Orange Is The New Black* – but there was not one single iota of *Stranger Things*."

With anticipation building, the Jim Hopper actor continued: "About two weeks before the launch, I said to him, 'Hey, man. They're not really putting up posters and stuff. I think it's a new model that Netflix has.'

He was, like, 'No, no. They're trying to bury your show.' I said to him, 'But they love this show.' He replied, 'No, trust me dude. They're trying to bury it.' Then, a week before, nothing. Then finally it dropped – and, relief, people liked it. It was a happy ending. We did not expect that at all."

CAST & CURIOUS

Back in June 2015, the first two actors were announced for the mysterious supernatural series: Winona Ryder and David Harbour.

Nearly two months later, the show's name was confirmed – along with the young actors in the cast: Finn Wolfhard, Millie Bobby Brown, Gaten Matarazzo, Caleb McLaughlin, Noah Schnapp, Natalia Dyer and Charlie Heaton.

Looking back at the early auditions, Shawn Levy said that Matarazzo was always the first choice for the role of Dustin. "Honestly, he was the only Dustin," he revealed to *SFX*. "He was our first. Hands down, we knew it as soon as Gaten left the room. We were, like, 'Well, that's done.'"

Finn Wolfhard recalled auditioning with Gaten and agreeing with the decision: "I was reading with a bunch of people – but when Gaten came in, I thought, 'Oh my god. This is it.' Gaten knows comedy timing so well. In the callback auditions, I was like, 'There's no way that Gaten can't be in this.'"

Millie Bobby Brown was another standout during her auditions, mastering Eleven's iconic, intense stare during her early meetings with the producers.

Levy recalled: "I remember Millie's callback, where she did a great reading. At the very end of her audition, she lowered her chin and did what would become 'the look'. I remember being in that room, going, 'Oh, there's something to this girl that no one's going to see coming.'"

Exactly how did Millie prepare for the stare? "I don't know," she said to *SFX* after the premiere. "I know that sounds really funny, but I didn't think I made a face. I just did it. It just happens."

It's no secret that the Duffer Brothers were heavily influenced by Steven Spielberg and prominent movies from the '70s and '80s, such as *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Jaws*, *Poltergeist* and *Stand By Me*, but did you know that *Game Of Thrones* also served as inspiration for *Stranger Things*?

"That *Game Of Thrones* thing they do when they kill off characters they aren't supposed to," explained Matt Duffer in 2017. "Suddenly, you don't feel safe any more, then the stakes feel a lot higher."

Dr Martin Brenner (centre): boo, hiss!

> “In our original pitch, the show was not originally intended as multiple series”

Gaten Matarazzo (left) and Caleb McLaughlin (right).

Nancy goes exploring. What could go wrong?

Fans went wild when – spoiler alert – Barb died, but Benny’s death in the first episode was another foreshadowing of things to come. “I remember when we wrote the pilot,” said Ross Duffer. “The reason we felt we needed to include the Benny death was because we wanted to clarify – in case anyone was confused – that this wasn’t a show just for kids. Also, this is not a show where the kids are necessarily safe. When I watched stuff like *The Goonies*, I felt the kids were in danger. His [Chunk’s] hand is going in that blender – it scared me as a child.”

“Spielberg loves putting children in danger,” added Matt Duffer. “That’s his favourite thing to do. Now everyone treats kids differently. They go, ‘Oh, we can’t be doing that any more.’ We thought, ‘Let’s put kids back in danger again.’”

An early script for season one of *Stranger Things* included an unexpected twist in the form of the death of a major character. “In our original pitch, the show was not originally intended as multiple series,” explained Ross. “Eleven was going to sacrifice herself.”

Thankfully, the showrunners changed their mind. “It made sense from the movie point of view as she’s this ET sort of character,” continued Ross. “But she’ll be back in season two. She has a really good journey in this season.” Truer words seldom spoken...

OUR FIRST SEASON FAVOURITES

Gaten, Finn and Millie’s most-loved scenes from season one...

MILLIE BOBBY BROWN

“I think my favourite scene in the first episode was the opening scene with the boys. It was so perfect. It was all about them completely interacting with each other, which is exactly what they do on set on a regular day. My favourite scene from the whole first season was when I was in the tank. It was challenging to act while being under the water, whilst hearing Matt and Ross in my ear saying weird stuff. It was a very weird day, but I loved it.”

FINN WOLFHARD

“In the first episode, it’s when [burger bar owner] Benny dies. That’s my favourite scene in episode one – but a favourite from the first season? That’s difficult. Maybe the cat scene, where she [Eleven] is trying to kill the cat?”

GATEN MATARAZZO

“One of my favourite scenes was by the quarry. It was me and Finn with the bullies. That was a lot of fun because it was really funny when he fell. Sorry, Finn. I know you hurt yourself, but it was funny. It was a lot of fun because we were filming on a cliff and it was scary. It was exhilarating.”

WINONA RYDER

THE UNPUBLISHED SFX INTERVIEW

Ahead of the launch of season one, Winona sat down with *SFX* to talk about *Stand By Me*, life on set and suspenseful *Stranger Things* scripts

FROM THE SFX ARCHIVES
DATE: 7 July 2016
LOCATION: Beverly Hills, California

How did the Duffer Brothers set the tone on the set of *Stranger Things*?
They have a really infectious enthusiasm, as well as a real genuine love of films of the '80s and the '70s. I know it's been said before, this whole thing about the show being a love letter to those movies, but they really, truly did want to make it like an homage rather than just rip them off. There is a fine line.

I haven't seen the whole thing, but I think they were successful in having their own vision about being heavily influenced by all of those wonderful movies like *Stand By Me* and *Close Encounters*. It really is an homage to that time.

What are the challenges of shooting a show like this?
As you get older, you want to try new things. Well, this gave me an opportunity to play my age. It was challenging because it was quite emotional at times. To have to play that level of emotion on a daily basis wasn't easy. It was also challenging for me because I'd never done a series before. I did [HBO drama] *Show Me A Hero*, but I only had a small role.

How would you describe the atmosphere on set?
I really appreciated how sensitive the directors were to the fact that I had to get quite emotional. After the first few days of crying a lot, I was nervous that they were going to think that I could just do it like that [snaps fingers]. I'm allergic to the stuff that they blow [in your eyes to help produce tears], so I have to actually really cry – and sometimes you need a minute to do that.

What goes through your mind when you try to cry on cue?
When you're aware that you're on a schedule and we're losing the light and we have to wrap or we're going into overtime, then it gets harder to do – but I felt very protected. We had a wonderful camera department, who are the people that were actually physically closest to me on the set. I always try to have a strong bond with them because I'm often holding their hands under the camera when I'm trying to cry. They were sensitive and I was really grateful for that.

What other obstacles did you face during the shoot?
Other than that, the tough thing was not having all of the episodes written. That was really weird, but they were able to tell me where it was going. To sign on to something without the ending – or without getting to read the whole thing – was a little bit scary.

How does it feel to be part of an ensemble cast?
I'm much more comfortable being in an ensemble now. I approach roles the same way if it's a lead or if it's a supporting role or if it's a small role. I still do the same prep, but it's nice to step back and let other people have their time, too. That was what was really nice about doing this show. The kids are so fantastic. They are so unique and funny. They're really great kids – and they love it. They're not the kind of kids that are being pushed into it. It was a really fun experience. And then, obviously, working with David Harbour was also great.

What do you remember the most from your teenage years? Were you riding around the neighbourhood on your bike, just like the kids in *Stranger Things*?
My teenage experience? Although I did have a bike, I had a skateboard, too – but what I really remember about that time was going to anti-apartheid things. I had joined Amnesty International. Things were going on in Nicaragua that were really frightening and my eyes were being opened to what was happening globally, which had a big impact on me. That was what I was doing.

How does that compare to the kids in the show?
In *Stranger Things*, it seems like a much more innocent time – and it was, in the sense that there was not the technology and the access that we have now, which is very great in ways and also very frightening in ways. We didn't have a TV until I was 13, so we had to use our imaginations and come up with games and play. I feel like there was that sense of innocence back then.

What's your personal relationship to the supernatural?
I've had two "experiences", but I don't know how interesting they are. Once, when I was about seven or eight; me, my brothers and my sister were sleeping on the roof and we think we saw a UFO. There was a boomerang going back and forth, but it could have really been anything. It could have been a light, but we were convinced it was a UFO.

What was the second experience?
Do you remember Samantha Smith? When Reagan was president, she was 12 years old and she wrote a letter to Reagan and Gorbachev. She asked for peace and it got a lot of attention.

She was a beautiful young girl and I had her picture on my wall, but she very tragically died in a plane crash. The night before she died, I had a dream that I was on a plane sitting next to her – and something was wrong. I woke up and I went into the kitchen and told my parents, but I guess it had just come on the news because my mom dropped her coffee cup.

After that, I was convinced I was psychic and that every dream meant something, but it never happened again. But that was very unexplained and strange.

The fifth and final season of Stranger Things will be released on Netflix in three parts. Part one premieres on 26 November, part two streams on 25 December and part three launches on 31 December.

All quotes and interviews from this retrospective article are from 2016 and 2017.

> The tough thing was not having all of the episodes written. That was really weird

SOMETHING TO HOWL ABOUT

DIRECTOR JOE DANTE EXPLAINS HOW THE HOWLING DEFIED EXPECTATIONS TO BECOME ONE OF THE CLASSIC WEREWOLF MOVIES

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

"WE DIDN'T WANT TO ADVERTISE it like a werewolf picture, so we disguised it to make it look more like a slasher movie," director Joe Dante says about his 1981 lycanthrope horror classic *The Howling*. "The beginning looks like a slasher movie, and the idea was to get the audience into the story and interested in the characters before we make them buy into the supernatural stuff."

The Howling commences with a suspenseful opening in which television news reporter Karen White (Dee Wallace) agrees to confront her stalker, serial killer "Eddie the Mangler" (Robert Picardo), in a sleazy porno theatre in a heroic plot to apprehend him. Following the subsequent killing of the monstrous perpetrator, the amnesiac Karen becomes traumatised by the ordeal and is sent by her therapist (Patrick Macnee) to an isolated coastal colony to recuperate.

However, she learns that her horrors have only begun after she hears strange howls in the middle of the night. "If you walk into the middle of *The Exorcist*, you will basically see a lot of standard horror movie effects," continues Dante. "However, if you go in at the beginning, you watch all these upsetting, subtle dark things that go on with this little girl that you care about, so by the time the head starts spinning and the vomit etc, you completely buy into it. We thought we'd do *The Howling* the same way."

HUNGRY LIKE THE WOLF

Based on horror author Gary Brandner's 1977 novel of the same name, *The Howling* was originally set to be a more straightforward adaptation; however, this changed once Dante came on board and hired John Sayles to rewrite it. "When I read the [original] script, it wasn't very good, and it was very close to the novel – which is a great read in terms of a fun pulp novel, but it doesn't make a great deal of sense when you think of it pictorially," says Dante. →

Robert Picardo goes full wolf... quite slowly.

"I went to John Sayles, and he was writing *Alligator* at night and our picture during the daytime. You'd knock on his door, and he'd say, 'Who is it?' and you'd hear him ripping paper out and putting in new paper and [then] he was working on [our] project," he laughs.

Dante had previously collaborated with Sayles on his 1978 *Jaws* parody *Piranha*, and he credits the writer-turned-director with bringing an equally satirical edge to *The Howling*. "He did a fantastic job, and the tone of the picture is darker than the movies I've made, but it's also got a lot of very funny stuff in it," continues Dante.

"I was very pleased to find out when he took it to the first preview that it worked for the audience – they laughed in the right places, they were scared in the right places."

> **"We went back and improved some of the effects, which we'd done very cheaply"**

On the strength of that preview screening, the studio decided to put more money into the film, which gave the animalistic threat a greater dimension. "We went back and improved some of the special effects, which we'd done very cheaply, and we shot for an extra couple of days with an improved werewolf suit, as there wasn't enough of it," reveals Dante.

"Rob Bottin, who had worked with me on *Piranha* and was now all of 21 years of age, was entrusted with this entire picture after Rick Baker left because John Landis had gotten wind of [our movie] and said, 'Rick always said he'd do my werewolf picture' [*An American Werewolf In London*].

"So Rob took over and did an amazing job and was able to compete with this multi-million-dollar werewolf movie on this very low budget and do very credible work, which was a major part of the movie's success."

Initially, Robert Picardo's werewolf transformation scene took place within one shot; however, cutaways were introduced to show Dee Wallace's reaction and enhance the drama and suspense.

Effects supremo Rob Bottin applies make-up.

Dee Wallace and Christopher Stone.

"With every episode of change that happens, if you get a reaction from it, it's different than just watching it happen because you're supposed to be invested in the characters," explains Dante. "So there are many cutaways to Dee Wallace's reaction, which makes the transformation scene better. It's the classic *Rear Window* editing conundrum."

Over 40 years later, thanks to an intricate fusion of sound, prosthetics, animatronics and slow and fast motion, the metamorphosis remains an eerie, surreal, if somewhat drawn-out experience.

"The only problem we had was when the studio saw the material they told us not to make it any shorter," Dante says, "so as a result, the transformation scene is elongated beyond its correct length.

"We brought some kids in to show them the scene, and they thought it was pretty cool but one of them said, 'Why don't she run away?' Of course, why doesn't she run away? Well, she can't because we've been told it had to be this long – that's why! So every time I see that scene, I feel if I could just get back in the editing room with the scissors I could make it so much better."

Contributing toward *The Howling*'s atmosphere of eerie dread was the isolated mist-shrouded forest location – where Dee Wallace is disturbed by malevolent sounds outside her wood cabin. "That's located up near George Lucas's ranch, and it was exactly what we needed for this colony as it had these cabins within this woodsy area," explains Dante, referring to California's scenic Mendocino Woodlands Camp.

"It was a combination of that and some well-chosen locations in Southern California. We managed to make it look pretty scary and creepy. [Cinematographer] John Hora's photography sometimes resembles Japanese paintings as the lighting is beautiful, especially for a picture that was made so quickly."

Named after the director of 1941 classic *The Wolf Man*, Dr George Waggner is the

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Yike! Marsha (Elizabeth Brooks) is also a wolf.

Director Joe Dante checks out the costume...

...and Rob Bottin makes some minor tweaks.

sophisticated, seemingly trustworthy therapist who sends Karen to this secluded colony for treatment. Dante had only one actor in mind for the part.

"I thought this would be perfect for Patrick Macnee because he's so urbane and likeable but could also have a sinister aspect to him," Dante says of the late British actor, who was immortalised as John Steed in *The Avengers*.

"The day that I met him, I had no idea he was so tall, and I opened the door, and he was facing the other way, and it was just like Boris Karloff's entrance in *Frankenstein* – he turned around and, 'Wow, it's Patrick Macnee!'"

While Dante was aware that John Landis was working on *An American Werewolf In London* during the production of *The Howling*, what he didn't anticipate was that he'd be competing with the releases of two further werewolf tales: Michael Wadleigh's murder mystery *Wolfen*, and Larry Cohen's more light-hearted *Full Moon High*.

"None of these projects were copies of each other; they were just projects that happened to go into the pipeline around the same time. In 1981, suddenly it was the year of the werewolf!"

The Howling spawned seven sequels. They range from the inventive highs of Philippe Mora's intentionally camp Aussie flick *The Howling III: The Marsupials* (featuring a spinning ballerina werewolf transformation!) to the embarrassing micro-budget lows of *Howling IV: The Original Nightmare*, which demonstrates why a more faithful adaptation of Brandner's novel doesn't work.

The most recent instalment, 2011's *The Howling Reborn*, was an attempted reboot that's only notable for being a werewolf training ground for future *Hemlock Grove* star Landon Liboiron.

Dante's original remains a hallmark of lycanthrope cinema. Its unpredictable narrative, pitch-perfect performances, use of an eerily secluded locale and spine-tinglingly tangible special effects make it an unforgettably nightmarish experience.

The Howling is available on Blu-ray.

THE BEAST WITHIN

Other werewolf yarns to howl about

THE WOLF MAN 1941

George Waggner's Universal classic retains its power largely thanks to Lon Chaney Jr's heartbreaking performance as Lawrence Talbot and Joseph A Valentine's crisp black and white photography. The transformation sequence where Chaney Jr's lower limbs shapeshift, accomplished via dissolves, is particularly praiseworthy when you realise the actor had to spend countless hours sitting motionless to achieve the effect.

AN AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON 1981

Released the same year as *The Howling*, John Landis's supernatural horror-comedy is iconic – largely thanks to Rick Baker's Oscar-winning make-up effects and the werewolf transformation sequence. As student David slowly metamorphoses to the strains of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Bad Moon Rising", the scene depicts the physical pain of animalistic alteration in all its limb-stretching, bone-cracking detail.

THE COMPANY OF WOLVES 1984

"The worst kind of wolves are hairy on the inside", warns Angela Lansbury's world-weary Granny to 12-year-old Rosaleen. Neil Jordan brings a dreamlike atmosphere to Angela Carter's chilling revision of *Little Red Riding Hood* as a tale of sexual awakening. The grisly transformation sequence where an enraged Stephen Rea tears his skin apart before a wolf erupts from inside still retains its gruesome power, as does a sequence at an 18th century wedding banquet where the greedy guests turn equally beastly.

WOLF 1994

Jack Nicholson was born to play the worn-out New York book editor who gets a new lease of life after becoming a demon wolf in Mike Nichols's corporate satire horror. The subsequent monstrous metamorphosis is a clever allegory for overcoming age discrimination and office politics. James Spader is equally perfect as the smug young protégé who enters a corporate powerplay with Nicholson, culminating in a thrilling werewolf wrangle.

DOG SOLDIERS 2002

A military training exercise in the Scottish Highlands goes awry when werewolves begin to hunt soldiers in this slow-building British shocker. The gritty energy, claustrophobia, and use of old-school men-in-monster-suits give Neil Marshall's film its thrilling and suspenseful power.

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Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

GARETH BROWN

Arch plotter: meet the Scottish novelist who wants his books to be fun

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by SP Lee

IT'S POSSIBLE TO BE TOO CONFIDENT. JUST ASK Scottish writer Gareth Brown. Writing his debut novel, *The Book Of Doors*, took four months. Then he sold the book. "I thought, 'Well, I'm brilliant at this,'" he says, gently poking fun at himself. "'This looks easy, I can do this.'"

This impression lasted until Brown began what we probably have to call his Difficult Second Novel, *The Society Of Unknowable Objects*. This time around, for "a couple of reasons", the writing process took a year. First of all, when he sat down to begin, Brown didn't really have a clear idea of the book he was embarking upon.

Then there was a strong sense of trying not to repeat himself, while at the same time being conscious that publishers value consistency. "I was just creating problems for myself," says Brown, who adds that to get to a finished manuscript, he wrote 300,000 words – three times the length of the published book – and wrote himself into several "cul-de-sacs".

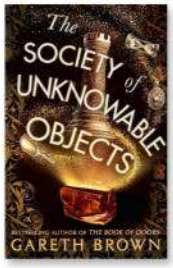
Perhaps because Brown himself didn't always know where he was going next, it's also a book where the narrative often seems to eschew the plot beats you think might be coming. Here is the upside of writing as an act of discovery rather than planning ahead. "I'm a bit of a masochist sometimes when I'm making up as I go," says Brown. "I'll get to the end of a chapter and ask myself, 'What would surprise me if it happened now?', and then I'll write it."

Happily, it has been worth the effort, because *The Society Of Unknowable Objects* is huge fun; a fast-paced globetrotting tale involving a secret society, magical artefacts and set-piece action scenes that demand to be filmed, notably a vivid evocation of the culture shock of a first visit to Hong Kong – a section of the book based on Brown's own experiences.

THE BOY WHO WOULD BE KING

As for his characters, led by thriller writer Magda Sparks, Brown doesn't disagree when *SFX* suggests that they come across like bookish superheroes. "It seems to be part of the DNA of my books that people who like books can be heroes too," he says. "Maybe that's a bit of wish fulfilment for me: people who read a book and sit quietly by themselves can be interesting as well. They're not boring!"

Brown himself began reading when he was a teenager. "A friend got me to read a Stephen King book," he says, "and that was my gateway drug into reading. For a long time, I wanted to be Stephen King, and I was writing shoddy Stephen King knock-off books."



BIODATA

From
Falkirk

Greatest Hits
Brown's first novel, *The Book Of Doors* (2024) – which as its name suggests, concerns a magical book – was an instant bestseller.

Random Fact
As a kid, Brown loved watching Michael Palin's travel series, and caught the travel bug. "I went around the world by myself," he says.

Because he wanted to be a writer, Brown chose to study English literature and philosophy at Edinburgh University. It didn't work out. In part because his taste has always been for fiction with a strong plot, he didn't much care for many of the books he had to study. Instead, he switched to a general arts degree. Without taking an Honours degree (which requires a fourth year of study in Scotland), despite being academically bright, he finished with academia.

Somewhere along the way, Brown, whose main instrument is bass, toyed with the idea of becoming a professional musician. His band supported Ben Folds and Babybird. "I wanted to be a rock star," he says. Trouble was, he was too much of an introvert for the prospect of stardom not to worry him. He didn't like the idea of poverty either: "I would have hated dossing around in London for two years waiting for the big deal to come."

KEEPING IT CIVIL

So Brown joined the Civil Service instead, where he has enjoyed a successful career – and a rewarding one. "You are perennially portrayed as the fat cat bureaucrat," he says. "You're on these massive salaries, supposedly, you've got these gold-plated pensions, and you're the Sir Humphreys of the world. But it's not like that. My experience of the Civil Service is that it's full of really interesting people who want to make the world a little bit better."

Currently, when he's not writing, Brown is "technically on a career break from the Civil Service", working with NHS Scotland as its director of screening. During the pandemic, he also worked in health in the Chief Medical Officer's office in Scotland. It was a tough time. People were working 18-hour days and, especially at the beginning, had little understanding even of how the disease spread.

"Some days, it was quite inspiring," he says of watching people "almost breaking themselves" to deal with the crisis, before adding dryly, "but I'm glad it's one of those things that maybe happens once in a lifetime."

It was during lockdown that Brown wrote *The Book Of Doors*, and while his life has subsequently returned to a more familiar pattern, there's a sense that a career as a full-time writer is close. He wants to write books that have the same vibe as *The Mummy* – the Brendan Fraser version. "I just want people to have a good time," Brown says of his novels. "I'm not aiming to win the Pulitzer Prize or anything, so if people want a bit of escapist, page-turnery fiction, pick up one of these books!"

The Society Of Unknowable Objects is published by Bantam on 7 August.

> “It seems to be part of the DNA of my books that people who like books can be heroes”

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edited by Ian Berriman

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JURASSIC WORLD REBIRTH

Rex appeal

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 133 minutes

Director **Gareth Edwards**

Cast **Scarlett Johansson, Jonathan Bailey, Mahershala Ali, Rupert Friend**

The *Rebirth* in the title refers to nothing more than the jump-starting of one of cinema's most bankable franchises, after 2022's *Dominion* fumbled what had seemed a bulletproof formula. Incoming director Gareth Edwards (*Godzilla*, *Rogue One*) and returning screenwriter David Koepp (the first two films) bring in a fresh set of characters, before getting back to business as usual.

Previous events haven't been retconned out of existence, but while the terrible reptiles still roam freely, they're limited to the warmer climate around the equator, and the general public has lost interest. This standalone instalment begins with a "17 years ago" prologue (which echoes Edwards's *Godzilla* opener) establishing *another* of InGen's secret R&D facilities on a mysterious island, where hybrids are being engineered.

Back in the present day, Rupert Friend's pharma company suit is assembling a team – mercenaries Zora (Scarlett Johansson) and Duncan (Mahershala Ali), paleontologist Henry (Jonathan Bailey) – to collect DNA samples from three of the biggest species on the abandoned site.

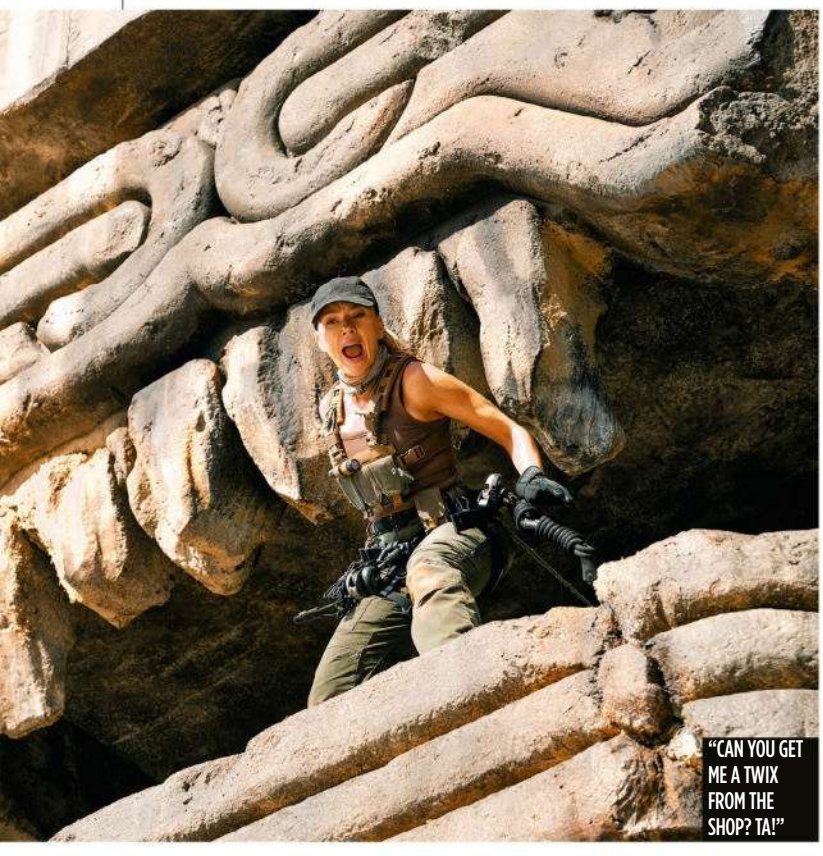
The *Jurassic* movies have always functioned as set-piece assemblages, and Edwards nails them. He's always had a Spielbergian sensibility when it comes to his action sequences, and that hero worship serves him well here. He knows the dinosaurs' best angles, but also revels in the set-up, and builds on the scale as the film goes on.

Arguably, the action peaks before the end, with a terrific river sequence that once again proves that no genetically engineered creation is a match for the T. rex. But there's no shortage of pulse-pounding sequences throughout – Mosasaur vs boat, a Quetzalcoatlus nest – as well as a couple of moments of heartfelt awe, one which is reminiscent of a tender moment in Edwards's low-budget debut *Monsters*.

There's also some added value in the solid character work, with backstories economically etched amid the carnivorous chaos. Parallel to the extraction story, there's a family running into trouble on a sailing expedition. There's enough humour to prevent it becoming po-faced, too, earning some leniency for the characters' less logical decisions.

The fan-service nods are brief and tasteful – there's another look at that famous banner; Henry mentions training under Alan Grant – but the same can't be said for the egregious product placement, with visible food and beverage packaging littered throughout. And while the six-limbed, Giger-inspired Distortus Rex is an impressive creation, the genetically modified beasts don't add all that much.

Still, despite those quibbles, Edwards admirably brings the series back to basics, unearthing its potential again. He also finds a way to imbue it with a sense of wonder – no easy feat when we've been seeing dinosaurs on the big screen for more than three decades now. **Matt Maytum**



For the film's best sequence, David Koepp adapts the T. rex river raft scene from Michael Crichton's 1990 source novel.

THE LEGEND OF OCHI

★★★½☆

RELEASED 1 AUGUST

12A | 95 minutes

Director **Isaiah Saxon**

Cast **Helena Zengel, Finn Wolfhard, Emily Watson, Willem Dafoe**

What would it look like if art-first indie studio A24 (who brought us the likes of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*) made a creature feature along the lines of '80s classics *Gremlins* and *ET*? Isaiah Saxon's *The Legend Of Ochi* provides the answer, whisking those styles together for a meditation on fractured families blended with a darkly hued fable.

Our focus here is Yuri (Helena Zengel), a young woman living on the island of Carpathia whose father Maxim (Willem Dafoe) is a blustery wannabe soldier who leads a crusade against the Ochi, local critters who have been attacking sheep.

A cryptozoological cross between an ape, a bear and a bat, they have their own language and hide out in the forests. But when Yuri befriends an injured infant Ochi, she discovers (as all heroes in these sorts of films must) that the situation is not as black and white as it appears.

Saxon's film has its own voice, with hints of Michel Gondry lurking within its DNA, and is carried by quirky character turns from Dafoe and Emily Watson (as Yuri's reserved, scowling and pragmatic mother, who studies the animals). It's a little slow at times, but has charm to spare and some top-notch practical puppet work. **James White**

BRING HER BACK

Fostering fear

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 AUGUST
18 | 104 minutes
Directors **Danny Philippou, Michael Philippou**
Cast **Sally Hawkins, Billy Barratt, Sora Wong, Jonah Wren Phillips**

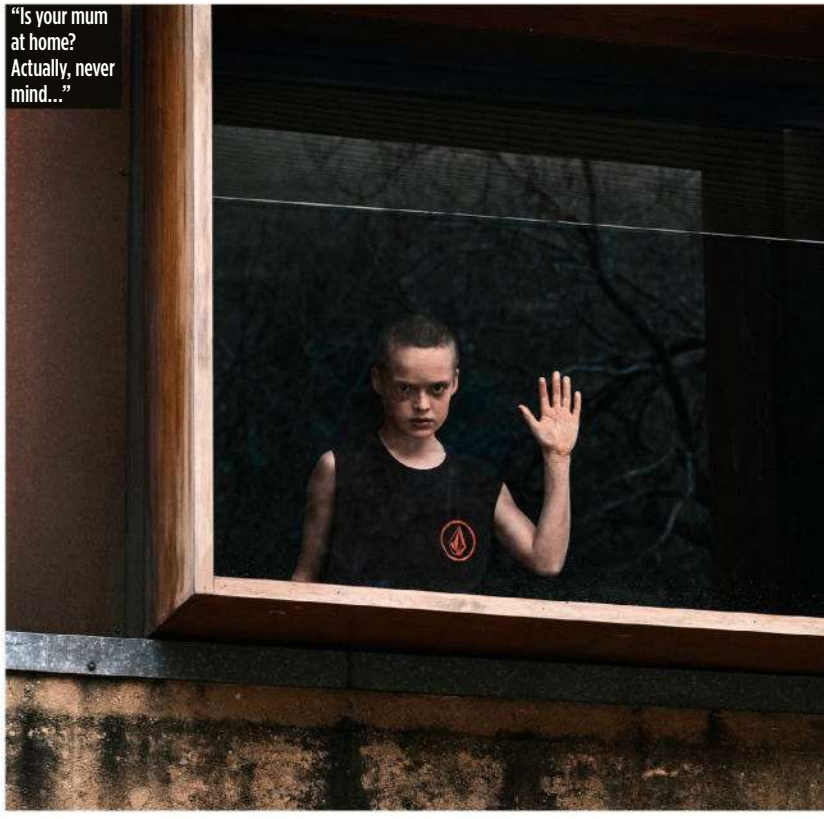
When *The Exorcist* arrived on these shores in 1974, various Christian groups moved to ban the eventual classic from being shown in cinemas; it's no stretch to imagine the Philippou brothers' second effort would have received the same treatment back then.

Of course, we've become accustomed to seeing demonic possession on screen in the passing decades, yet these up and coming filmmakers manage to find something new and interesting to say in the subgenre.

Bring Her Back is, first and foremost, a family drama about two newly orphaned siblings, Andy and the partially-sighted Piper, who are taken in by Sally Hawkins's grieving mother, Laura. They soon realise something's very wrong when their new foster brother, Oliver, bites the head off a bird, and things slowly spiral from there.

A sense of dread pervades every frame, amped up further when the film-within-a-film, shot on VHS by a creepy cult, reveals more about the central mystery. Featuring some stellar, shocking practical effects and a surprising performance from Hawkins that will wipe any memory you had of her being Paddington's mother, this is an *Exorcist*-inspired flick with an evil, unfamiliar twist. **Jack Shepherd**

i Sally Hawkins spent one day as a crowd scene extra on *The Phantom Menace*, but is unsure if she made the final cut.



"Is your mum at home? Actually, never mind..."

28 YEARS LATER

Still Crazy After All These Years

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
15 | 115 minutes
Director **Danny Boyle**
Cast **Alfie Williams, Jodie Comer, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Ralph Fiennes**

Danny Boyle and Alex Garland's continuation of their not-really-zombies saga is a curate's egg. If you like rich world-building (or massive swinging dongs), you've hit the jackpot. If you want plausible characterisation or tonal consistency, you're shit out of luck.

The opening act is flawless. In classic John Wyndham style, we enter a small society isolated on an island – in this case, Lindisfarne. Boyle has spoken of this insular community as a microcosm of Brexit, but it seems a decent place to live, unless you can't deal with beery renditions of "Delilah".

When 12-year-old Spike (Alfie Williams) crosses the causeway with his dad (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) to be blooded via his first kills, we see how a quarantined UK has transformed. There are some interesting innovations here. Some Infected are grossly obese, crawling creatures. A small number have become super-charged (and well-hung...) "Alphas".

And all are naked – well, over three decades, clothing *would* disintegrate. Shots of things like stampeding herds of deer convey a sense of the passage of time. It's *28 Days Later* through the lens of the CG tools used on things like the modern-day *Planet Of The Apes*.

Logic falters once Spike decides to spirit his sickly mother (Jodie Comer) to the mainland, hoping the one surviving doctor (Ralph Fiennes) – a post-apocalyptic equivalent of the architect of LA's Watts Towers – can cure her. If Garland's making a contribution to the assisted dying debate here, it's one that backfires in head-scratching fashion.

In its final moments, if *28 Years Later* doesn't jump the shark, it at the very least puts on its waterskis. Once you've had time to unpack the closing scene, it makes a certain warped sense. But the tonal shift is so jarring it practically causes whiplash. Despite all the film's good qualities – including thrilling action sequences, and some impressive cinematography – you may come away with your enthusiasm for follow-up *The Bone Temple* significantly dulled. **Ian Berriman**

i Due to Alfie Williams's age they had to make prosthetic genitals for all the Infected, to avoid breaking the law.

"Oh crap, I've forgotten to bring the arrows."

ELIO

Star Child

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 98 minutes

Directors **Adrian Molina, Domee Shi, Madeline Sharafian**

Cast **Yonas Kibreab, Zoe Saldaña, Brad Garrett, Jameela Jamil**

Quick, crank up the plushie merch machine!

Dipping its toes back into original territory after the huge success of sequel *Inside Out 2* might feel like something of a gamble for Pixar, but it's one that mostly pays off with *Elio*, a sweet story of alienation and interstellar buddy bonding.

The titular young protagonist (voiced by Yonas Kibreab), newly orphaned, is trying to adapt to life with his aunt Olga (voiced by Zoe Saldaña) when he's scooped up by an alien alliance called the "Communiverse", and soon offers to help them battle an aggressive threat to their peace.

Colourful and creative, the film zips through the usual buddy comedy elements as Elio meets and becomes friends with an alien kid (Remy Edgerly's Glordon), who has his own family issues.

Thanks to a sweeping score from Rob Simonsen and a few voice clips of late astronomy icon Carl Sagan, *Elio* is catnip for space enthusiasts, while the weird and silly extraterrestrial characters will charm kids. With themes of isolation, grief and figuring out a new family dynamic peppered throughout, it might not have the invention and grandeur of, say, *WALL-E*, but it certainly manages a workable blend between sci-fi and caper comedy.

James White

ℹ Elio originally was going to have a mother voiced by America Ferrera. Scheduling issues forced a change to Saldaña.

WATCH THE SKIES

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 115 minutes

Detectorists* meets *Close Encounters in this Swedish film, presented in English via pioneering AI dubbing technology, to impressive and thankfully ethical effect.

The daughter of a missing UFOlogist teams with fellow misfits to search for him. A tale told with humour and a shot of Scandi melancholy, which summons the odd Spielbergian flourish, it explores the thin line between belief and obsession with a keen eye for the human heart. **Nick Setchfield**

M3GAN 2.0

Robot Wars

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 120 minutes

Director **Gerard Johnstone**

Cast **Allison Williams, Violet McGraw, Jemaine Clement, Jenna Davis, Ivanna Sakhno**

"Cady, what is this 'love' of which you speak?"

"If you think there's a world in which I'd build another one, you're out of your mind!" cries roboticist Gemma (Allison Willliams) early on in the action. But build one she does (naturally).

The titular upgrade of the first movie's AI robot (again played by Amie Donald) is thrust into action to take down AMELIA (Ivanna Sakhno), a weaponised fem-bot built by a defence contractor who's stolen M3GAN's tech. AMELIA (Autonomous Military Engagement Logistics and Infiltration Android, obvs) was meant to retrieve a kidnapped scientist; instead, she killed the captured boffin before turning her sights on the other 8.2 billion humans on the planet.

What we have here is essentially the *T2* of *M3GAN* movies, with our AI gal, who again pairs with Gemma's orphaned niece Cady (Violet McGraw), needing to learn about kindness, loyalty and forgiveness as she goes up against what is essentially a Terminatrix.

But that's just the start of the borrowed programming: a large injection of campy humour renders the tone of this knowing sequel all very *Bride Of Chucky*, while the brutal, martial arts-led robot fights recall Leigh Whannell's excellent *Upgrade*.

> **"There's a large injection of campy humour"**

Add in riffs on the first movie's most meme-orable moments – we get a new M3GAN dance routine and a scuttle into violent action on all fours – and you're looking at a sequel that's a lot of fun.

It's also a lot, full stop. The two-hour running time is crammed with new tech (an AI chip inserted directly into the human brain plays Cronenberg-lite), twisty-turny plotting, exposition dumps and frequent musings on the pros and cons of AI and the levels of human culpability. The tone, then, is patchy, and some grinding stretches might have you longing for the next scene of AMELIA punching a head clean off a pair of shoulders. **Jamie Graham**

ℹ The filmmakers get around Amie Donald's growth spurt by having the upgraded M3GAN ask Gemma for a taller body.

SCARRED FOR LIFE

GROWING UP IN THE DARK SIDE OF THE DECADE

GROWING UP IN THE DARK SIDE OF THE DECADE
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- Andy Nyman (The Woman in Black, Dead Set, Ghost Stories)
GROWING UP IN THE DARK SIDE OF THE DECADE
SCARRED FOR LIFE
VOLUME TWO: TELEVISION IN THE 198
Stephen Brotherstone and Dave Lawrence
with Jez Conolly, Mark Cunliffe, James Gent, Neil Mitchell, Helena Nash, Andrew Orton, and Chris Orton
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WITH JEZ CONOLLY BOB FISCHER JAY GENT HELENA NASH ANDREW ORTON
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INTRODUCTION BY JOHNNY MAINS

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VOLUME THREE: POP CULTURE IN THE SHADOW OF THE BOMB:
B&W paperback £24.99/ebook £8.99, 740 pages

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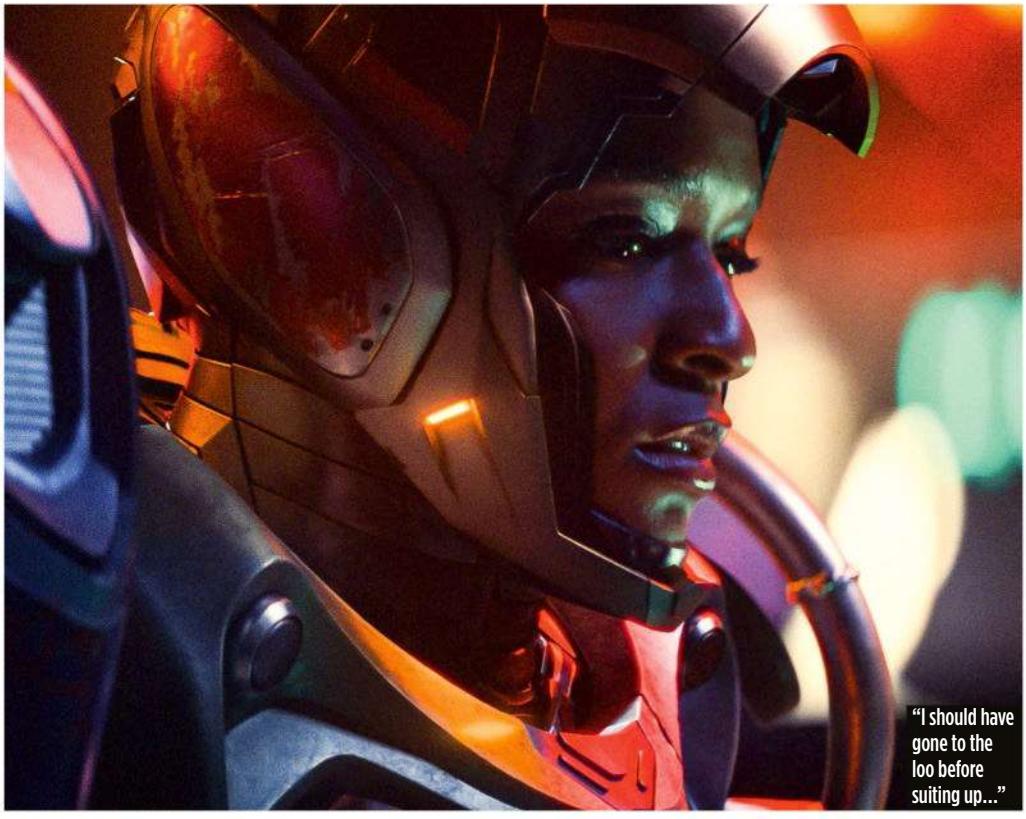

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time...

- **Someone takes the piss out of Stuart's desire to be called Rampage.**
- **NATALIE makes Riri jump.**
- **NATALIE briefly pixelates for no apparent reason other than to remind you that she's a hologram.**

- **Tony Stark gets a namecheck (look out for mentions of him on posters too).**
- **The lights unexpectedly go out.**
- **Somebody says, "Because I could" (or close variations).**
- **There's a sign, poster or T-shirt with a Chicago connection.**

IRONHEART Season One

Robbing Hood and maiden of iron

★★★½☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Chinaka Hodge**

Cast **Dominique Thorne, Lyric Ross, Anthony Ramos, Alden Ehrenreich, Shea Couleé, Matthew Elam**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Apparently,** *Ironheart* is the last part of the MCU's Phase Five, not that that means much. After Phase One, the starts and ends of MCU phases have been pretty arbitrary, but even allowing for that, *Ironheart* mostly feels like a "S'all right" shrug in TV drama form.

Ironheart is Riri Williams, the teenage-girl tech whizz introduced in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, who likes knocking out Iron Man-style armoured suits. She's now back at MIT, supplying other students with a cash-for-plagiarism service to help raise funds so she can build more suits.

This – plus a few lab explosions – leads to her expulsion, so she heads back home to Chicago, where she draws the attention of thieves targeting rich CEOs with dubious business practices. They're led by Parker Robbins, aka The Hood, on account of the otherworldly cape-and-cowl combo he wears that give him superpowers. Parker offers Riri a role as the crew's tech expert, and she agrees, justifying the move as a means of funding her life-saving work. But Parker turns out to be more dangerous than she realised.

> **"*Ironheart* never fully exploits its potential"**

It's actually a great central conceit for a superhero show, especially one that seems to be pitching itself as the story of a flawed character learning how to find the hero within themselves. And there's a lot of fun to be had in the heists' action sequences and the interactions between the weirdo bunch of crims.

But *Ironheart* never fully exploits its potential. Partly this is down to trying to pack too much into six episodes. We also get a lot of backstory for Riri – how she lost her stepdad and best friend Natalie in a drive-by shooting – which leads to her accidentally creating NATALIE, an AI interface that looks and acts exactly like her dead bestie. Then there's a villain-behind-the-villain, a subplot involving a past MCU villain's son, and a magic shop where an obscure *Doctor Strange* character works. For much of the time, the plot may move forwards but the character arcs are treading water, with everyone making the same points repeatedly.

Another major problem is that Riri is so damned annoying. Sure, the fact she makes dumb decisions is the point, but after a while you just want to scream at her to get her shit together. Meanwhile, The Hood is a dreary villain who never feels like the threat we keep getting told he is. Ooh, he can turn invisible and make bullets go off-course. Hardly Galactus, is he?

Things perk up in the last couple of episodes, however, partly thanks to Sacha Baron Cohen turning in a brilliantly unnerving performance as the manipulative Mephisto – though the very final moments (which scream "Please recommission us!") suggest that Riri is still making very bad choices. At least she's consistent.

Jonathan Norton

i Mephisto previously appeared in the two *Ghost Rider* movies, played by Peter Fonda and Ciarán Hinds respectively.

HELL MOTEL

True crime, skewered

★★★½☆

UK/US **Shudder, streaming now**
Creators **Ian Carpenter, Aaron Martin**
Cast **Paula Brancati, Jim Watson, Genevieve DeGraves, Shaun Benson**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **How long ago** does an unsolved murder have to have happened for it not to feel ghoulish to make the murder site into a tourist attraction?

The hapless motel owners in Shudder's new slasher show are betting three decades is long enough. They're reopening the infamous Cold River motel, where a series of ritualistic murders took place in the '90s, as a dark tourism destination. As a soft launch, they've invited six true crime aficionados for a weekend of hijinks: there's podcaster Blake, ageing scream queen Paige, academic Andy, psychic Crow, artist Kawayan and serial killer romancer Adriana.

The cast is rounded out by flamboyant chef Hemmingway, and tourists Floyd and Shirley, who were forced to seek refuge in the motel due to a storm. Because of course there's a storm, and of course there's no cellphone service, and of course there's a murderer among them.

By the end of the first episode, someone's already met a grisly end. Intriguingly, though, the first episode also ends with a reveal. It's something you'll already have suspected, but it changes the whole dynamic of the whodunnit. It's a hell of a hook – and a smart move by the showrunners. At that point, it's too early to be too invested in any of the characters, but that cheeky tweak to the slasher formula will be enough to bring you back for episode two.

> **"A reveal changes the whole dynamic of the whodunnit"**

Speaking of slashers, fans of the anthology series *Slasher* should definitely check this one out, because it's technically season six – it's just been repackaged to appeal to a wider audience. No worries if you're a newbie, though, because it's a standalone story. As such, it's a fun one: the Agatha Christie of it all is well-handled, the killer's mask properly creepy, and the kills creative and gory.

The real horror, though, is that 1995 was 30 years ago. Oof.

Sarah Dobbs

i Paula Brancati says she puts herself on vocal rest after shoots that involve a lot of screaming, to protect her voice.

SQUID GAME Season Three

Too much extra time

★★½☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
Creator **Hwang Dong-hyuk**
Cast **Lee Jung-jae, Kang Ae-shim, Jo Yu-ri, Lee Byung-hun**

EPISODES 2.01-2.07 **While this may** be designated as season three of the South Korean death-game series, it's really just season two continued, with the same tournament and players (the ones who are still alive, that is).

It's also the weakest, most overstretched batch of episodes. There are still gripping, moving scenes, but the death-game format means the number of characters we care about inevitably drops as the heap of corpses rises. As engaging players bite the dust, the pacing gets slacker and there's also the unwelcome return of some series deadwood – those stupid masked millionaire VIPs from season one are back to bore us.

These episodes continue directly from season two, with the crushing of Gi-hun's attempted rebellion. Gi-hun himself is left alive and forced to continue the games, but his defeat has broken him to the point that he's practically catatonic. However, we begin with most of the other sympathetic players still around, including the seemingly indomitable OAP Geum-ja (Kang Ae-shim). She electrifies the emotionally weightiest scenes, but at a cost – they make the show's lame parts seem all the feebler.

The games themselves start well, with the characters being divided into teams of hunters and forced into a frantic maze chase, with fiendishly cruel payoffs. But even the games diminish through these episodes, slowed down by cutaways to other subplots and interjections from those wretched VIPs, whose witless commentary sucks the life from every moment they're on screen.

> **"The number of characters we care about inevitably drops"**

The show's sour take on democracy as a justification for atrocities descends into grotesque farce, but even that theme becomes laboured as it grinds on. The final outcome isn't the most predictable one – not quite – but it's a fudge which threatens further sequels and even more diminished returns. **Andrew Osmond**

i A David Fincher remake is in development. Original showrunner Hwang Dong-hyuk says, "I welcome it with all my heart."

THE INSTITUTE

Abused superkids in Stephen King megamix

★★½☆☆

- UK/US **MGM+, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Benjamin Cavell**
- Cast **Ben Barnes, Mary-Louise Parker, Joe Freeman, Julian Richings**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **There's a good** chance that if you didn't know *The Institute* was a Stephen King adaptation (and you kept your eyes shut through the opening credits – which might be a good idea if you're spoilerphobic), you'd have guessed it was by the end of the first episode.

Admittedly, it's a little more sci-fi horror than the supernatural horror King's usually associated with. And the main character isn't a writer, artist or teacher (though he is a "night knocker", which sounds like the name of an abandoned King novel, but actually means he's a kind of nightwatchman for an entire small town where the real cops are all tucked up in bed at night – because, hey, who expects crime after dark?). But in most other ways, *The Institute* is a smorgasbord of King's greatest hits: bite-sized chunks of *Carrie*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Dark Tower*, *Firestarter*, *The Outsider*, *Kingdom Hospital*, *Rita Hayworth And Shawshank Redemption*, *The Green Mile* and *It* (and probably loads more), served up on a shiny new platter.

So what we have here is a tale of kids with low-level telepathic and telekinetic skills being kidnapped and experimented on in an inescapable "Institute" run by a bunch of seriously wacko suits and scientists. They're led by the sadomasochistic Ms Sigsby (Mary-Louise Parker), a woman who should never be left alone with a staple remover. The kids are told that if they pass some weird tests (spot the spots!) they'll progress to the next stage, but they're pretty sure they're never leaving this place.

Meanwhile, drifting ex-cop with a tragic past Tim Jamieson (Ben Barnes, doing his best Keanu Reeves in anything other than *Bill And Ted* impression), winds up in a small town where he takes on the job of night knocker, and discovers that there's something deeply strange about a nearby scientific facility.

You can probably guess where this is all going from that synopsis. There aren't many surprises here, so much as storylines concocted from King tropes, culminating in a big moral dilemma as old as, "If you could go back in time and kill Hitler...?" It's not even much of a dilemma: without giving anything away, it's a hoary old "ends justifying the means" argument, where you can't help thinking there must a whole load of different "means" available that *don't* involve killing kids.

But that's the destination, and often the journey's more rewarding. Certainly, the earlier episodes where it's unclear what's happening are intriguing, weird and intense, with some visually striking set-pieces. The series also benefits from some excellent performances. Mary-Louise Parker in mad-bonkers mode is constantly watchable, while Joe Freeman, as the main gifted teen, is a nervy, twitchy but charismatic force of nature.

Ultimately though, it's a strong central idea stretched way too thin, that implodes under the weight of its own goofy sci-fi hokum by the climax. **Dave Golder**

"This seems an extreme way to access MGM+..."

i While his surname isn't mentioned in the series, in the book, George shares it with author George Iles, a friend of King's.

THE WALKING DEAD: DEAD CITY

Season Two

★★★★☆

- UK **Sky Atlantic/NOW, streaming now**
- US **AMC, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Eli Jorné**
- Cast **Lauren Cohan, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Željko Ivanek, Lisa Emery**

EPISODES 2.01-2.08 **The NYC-set** *Walking Dead* spinoff continues to find inventive approaches to the zombie apocalypse.

The first season ended with Lauren Cohan's Maggie trading in her uneasy ally Negan to the Croat (Željko Ivanek) to get her son back. Cut to a year later and the New Babylon Federation is putting pressure on Maggie's community, and Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan) has been co-opted into working for the vicious Dama (Lisa Emery).

Dead City has an unusual tone – an intriguing fusion of Western and a civil war drama, with zombies. Certainly its most interesting moments come not from the Walkers, but the scenes that find a new flavour for the well-explored *Dead*-verse: a sort-of naval battle in episode two, or some *Game Of Thrones*-esque courtly intrigue mid-season.

Ultimately, though, the show remains anchored around its central frenemies. Jeffrey Dean Morgan impresses as a version of Negan who hasn't reverted to his bad old ways, but is increasingly forced to call on his more ruthless streak, while Lauren Cohan's Maggie finally gets some catharsis. A third season would be welcome, but if this is the end then it's a satisfying place to leave these characters. **Will Salmon**

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"Try to ignore how phallic it looks."

QUATERMASS

Rocket Man

RELEASED OUT NOW!
1955/1957 | PG/12 | 4K & Blu-ray
Director **Val Guest**
Cast **Brian Donlevy, Jack Warner, John Longden, Sid James**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's a cliché to say** that British sci-fi owes an enormous debt to Nigel Kneale – but it's a cliché because it's true. His '50s serials centred on rocket scientist Bernard Quatermass feel familiar even on initial viewing, because they've been so influential. And if Hammer hadn't scored boffo box office with big-screen takes, they'd never have pivoted to horror. It's a cultural contribution that fully warrants lavish dual-format box sets of the first two films.

Expertly directed by Val Guest, both are compellingly urgent affairs, firmly grounded in reality, that make a good fist of squeezing three hours of TV down to less than half the time span.

A template for Jon Pertwee-era *Doctor Who*, **The Quatermass Xperiment** ★★★★½ sees a rocket returning to Earth with two of its three crew missing. It gradually becomes clear that the third – infected in space – has absorbed them. Once he's on the run, growing more monstrous by the hour, the tension ratchets up and up. Richard Wordsworth is remarkably expressive as the gaunt, mute Victor Carroon, though dropping the idea that *knowledge* can also be absorbed is arguably a misstep, and the level of pathos is somewhat diminished.

A paranoid thriller in the vein of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers*, **Quatermass 2** ★★★★★ sees our hero uncovering an infiltration that reaches into the corridors of Whitehall. It makes good use of an increased budget, with extensive location filming at a Shell refinery doubling for a secret project where Cthulhian monstrosities are coalescing in giant domes. It's a surprisingly tough affair, with death by corrosive slime and the sight of Sid James (excellent as a boozy hack) machine-gunned by gas-masked guards notable shocks.

If one thing lets both down, it's the casting of Brian Donlevy in the lead role. There's a difference between "driven" and "unlikeable asshole", and the American actor's abrasive interpretation often crosses the line.

Extras Both sets ★★★★★ are incredibly well stocked. Each film is presented in three formats: UK widescreen, full screen, and US widescreen (their version of *Xperiment* has cuts for violence). Each has multiple commentaries: four on Xperiment (three new); seven (two new) for its follow-up.

The centrepiece is *The Legend Of Nigel Kneale*, a two-part doc spread across the box sets (43 minutes each). A little too much time is expended on critical pontification (you can easily imagine Kneale harrumphing at the mention of Marshall McLuhan). We'd rather have heard more of the man himself (amusingly acerbic in snippets of audio). The fact that many of the writer's projects are dispensed with in a sentence makes this imbalance doubly frustrating.

Meticulous retrospectives on both films (37/39 minutes) delve into BBFC paperwork, and include appreciative contributions from TV writers Stephen Gallagher and Stephen Volk. The same line-up of mavens also give their verdict on Donlevy (12 minutes), and there are useful profiles of both the US star (15 minutes) and Richard Wordsworth (20 minutes).

Seven minutes' chat with two crew from *2* includes an eyebrow-raising anecdote about the sparks spying on a canoodling director! *Xperiment* also comes with a short that accompanied it (29 minutes): footage of a big band performing seven numbers. Other new goodies include a Guest interview shot for a 1994 doc (21 minutes), one from a 2000 film festival (nine minutes), and brief restoration featurettes.

> **"Both films are compellingly urgent affairs"**

Five other features are carried over from old DVD releases for the TV shows and the films. If you don't own the former, the inclusion of all six parts of *Quatermass II* will be a real treat – and the cringeworthy final episode (which heads into space) will make you appreciate the adaptation even more... The first two parts of *The Quatermass Experiment* (the only ones recorded) are also here. Plus: a commentary offcut; cut-down Super 8 versions; alternate titles; BBFC censor cards; galleries; trailers. Finally, both sets come with double-sided posters, eight art cards, sizeable booklets (176/180 pages), and reprints of comic versions from '70s mag *The House Of Hammer*. **Ian Berriman**

i Guest was careful to shoot Donlevy facing the wind, due to his toupee. But filming one *Quatermass 2* scene, it blew off.

THE STUFF

Murder, By Sweet

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED **21 JULY**
1985 | 15 | 4K
Director **Larry Cohen**
Cast **Michael Moriarty, Andrea Marcovicci, Garrett Morris, Paul Sorvino**

Killer dessert! It's a typically oddball high concept from Larry Cohen, the man who brought us mutant babies (the *It's Alive* franchise) and set an Aztec god loose in NYC (*Q: The Winged Serpent*). This one powers a satire on rampant consumerism with a soupcon of *Invasion Of The Body Snatchers* and a dash of *The Blob*.

Michael Moriarty plays our hero, an industrial spy with an "Aw shucks" manner. Tasked with investigating new dessert sensation The Stuff, he discovers that it bubbles out of the ground and, if consumed in sufficient quantities, turns you into a mind-controlled "Stuffy". Teaming up with a marketing woman, a boy who saw The Stuff moving, and a right-wing militia leader, he infiltrates the operation and gets the truth out there.

Moriarty (who wildly improvised throughout) is delightfully idiosyncratic, and the whole film has a similarly loose feel – it makes sense that Cohen compared himself to a jazz performer. And while many effects (especially composites) look shonky, that's all part of its charm.

Extras The exciting thing about this Arrow Video 4K is a pre-release cut rediscovered in 2022, with half an hour of extra footage. The romance element is properly fleshed out, various quirky tangents are restored, and there are additional cheesy TV ads for The Stuff. The alternate score is an improvement too. Further new additions are interview clips from 2017 documentary *King Cohen* (17 minutes), and a critical commentary. A Cohen commentary has been ported from the old DVD, while an engaging retrospective (52 minutes) is carried over from the 2016 Blu-ray.

Then there's feature-length grindhouse doc *42nd Street Memories* (to which the late Cohen was a contributor); gorehounds may already own this, as it was on the 2017 Blu-ray of Italian nasty *Anthropophagous*. Plus: trailers; gallery; booklet.

UHD refuseniks, note: the theatrical cut and bonuses are only on a 4K disc. But the pre-release cut is on a Blu-ray. **Ian Berriman**

"Pssst... the script is in shot, just so you know."

When The Stuff appeared in huge quantities, firefighting foam was used. Made of ground-up fish bones, it *stank*.

SPECIES

Alien Sex Fiend

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
1995 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray
Director **Roger Donaldson**
Cast **Natasha Henstridge, Ben Kingsley, Michael Madsen, Forest Whitaker**

If *Alien* was "*Jaws* in space" you suspect the pitch for *Species* was equally succinct: "*Alien*... but *hawt*!"

In truth it's a genre spin on a different strain of movie altogether: the fad for erotically charged thrillers where libidinous men are stalked by predatory women. Think *Basic Instinct*, *Fatal Attraction*. This is a Glenn Close encounter of the third kind.

Natasha Henstridge is the extraterrestrial hybrid looking to mate with an Earthman. More concerned with erogenous zones than the Twilight Zone, she mixes innocence and malevolence without ever quite nailing an authentically alien vibe. Master of the xenomorph HR Giger supplies the design for her true state, a characteristically perverse psychosexual nightmare of elongated cranium, bio-mechanical trimmings and weaponised nipples.

The early CG has dated badly, but this '90s schlock is buoyed by an improbably strong cast that includes a permanently smirking Michael Madsen, who almost persuades you he's wandered in from another movie for a giggle.

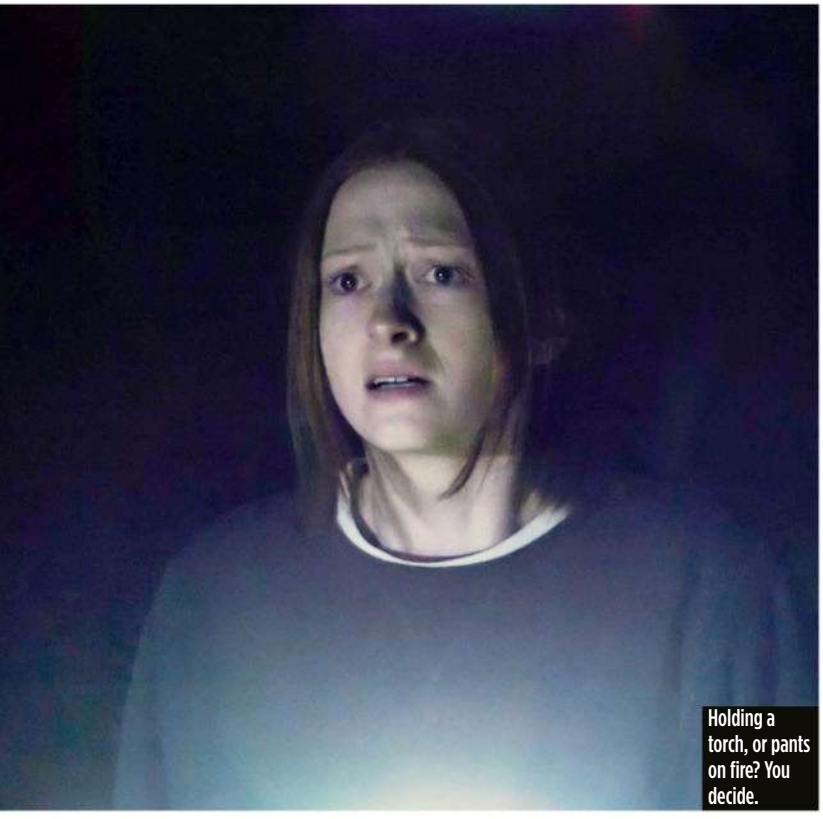
Extras 88 Films' new 4K remaster has two new features. Composer Christopher Young discusses the evolution of the main title cue (20 minutes), while actor Jordan Lund recalls building backstory for his character with Ben Kingsley (19 minutes).

Everything else is archival. A 2017 retrospective gives good insight into the practical effects (37 minutes), while a candid 2015 interview with Henstridge spans the *Species* franchise (16 minutes). There's also an interview with writer Dennis Feldman (10 minutes) and three behind-the-scenes featurettes, including a closer look at the creature design (2004, 55 minutes). An alternate ending reveals a more playfully romantic coda (two minutes).

There are three commentaries: Henstridge, Madsen and Donaldson; Donaldson and crew; critics Kim Newman and Sean Hogan. Plus: trailer; gallery. The Limited Edition adds a poster and six lobby card repros. **Nick Setchfield**

"Jeez, at least buy me dinner first."

The voice of Sil was performed by Frank Welker, also the voice of Fred in *Scooby-Doo*, as well as assorted Transformers.



Holding a torch, or pants on fire? You decide.

THE BANISHED

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

★★★★☆

RELEASED 28 JULY
2025 | 15 | Digital
Director **Joseph Sims-Dennett**
Cast **Meg Eloise-Clarke, Leighton Cardno, Gautier de Fontaine, Tony Hughes**

Just as British folk horror is rooted in the soil, so Australian cinema has traditionally tapped into the uncanny power of an ancient landscape.

Vanishing its characters among ominously vast escarpments, in a wilderness of hushed green menace, this tale of grief and family secrets clearly shares a bloodline with *Picnic At Hanging Rock*. But it blends that debt with other inspirations – *The Blair Witch Project*, *Midsommar* – to create something more intriguing than a straight rehash of familiar Antipodean tropes.

A determined Meg Eloise-Clarke is Grace Jennings, hiking into the bush in search of her missing brother, David – and a fabled utopia, "like a commune", from which people never return. Told in non-linear fashion, the plot is a puzzle box that sets up a compelling sequence of mysteries even as it offers unsettling glimpses of a deeper darkness in Grace's past.

Written, directed and produced by Joseph Sims-Dennett, this is clearly a singular vision, one that embraces outback survival thriller as much as hallucinatory horror. A provocative if not entirely satisfying ending, slippery with dream logic and primally upsetting imagery, is guaranteed to creep beneath your skin. **Nick Setchfield**

i The film made its festival debut under the title *Baal*, a name that means lord and which is associated with false gods.

FRANKIE FREAKO

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 15 | Digital

This '80s homage proves it's not so hip to be square, as a corporate drone turns to a strange telephone hotline that promises to fix his reputation as a blandroid. In fact he summons the Freakos, extraterrestrial mischief-makers determined to party just a little too hard.

There's a handcrafted gonzo charm to the film's old-school latex puppetry and practical miniatures. But while it evokes the anarchic slapstick of *Gremlins*, the meathead humour lacks the wit and spark of Joe Dante. **Nick Setchfield**

CRUMB CATCHER

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2024 | 18 | Blu-ray

Though it's been called one of 2024's best horrors, this is more of a darkly comic thriller.

Two newlyweds' honeymoon retreat is interrupted by a waiter pitching a pointless invention. John Speredakos impresses as this increasingly menacing oddball, and writer/director Chris Skotchdopole cleverly deploys disordered camerawork as events spiral. But it's a long wait for the inevitable escalation, spent in the company of a wearyingly fractious couple.

Extras Commentary; Making Of; two shorts. **Ian Berriman**

OSIRIS

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 28 JULY/4 AUGUST
2023 |15 | Digital/ Blu-ray/DVD

Special Forces troops are abducted by flesh-craving aliens in this SF actioner. Teaming with *The Terminator*'s Linda Hamilton – who provides a characterful turn as a veteran Russian tank commander – they assess the situation as "tier one bullshit" before taking the fight to their captors.

Indebted to the spirit of HR Giger and James Cameron, this is pure lock 'n' load, played with conviction. But the endless gunnery gets so monotonous there are moments you feel trapped in a giant game of Laser Quest. **Nick Setchfield**

SAINT CLARE

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 21 JULY
2025 | N/A | Digital

Based on a YA novel, this tale of a teenage serial killer is, frankly, a mess. Bella Thorne (27) plays the titular Clare, who murders male predators, believing she's doing God's work. If you're not already thinking "*Dexter*?", you will during regular chats with the "ghost" of a dead mailman.

The latter are entertaining, but as a cat and mouse game with a detective develops, key plot points are laid out so badly as to inspire baffled rewinds. And the final twist is just one of many details that prompts a derisive snort. **Ian Berriman**

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WITCH FROM NEPAL

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1986 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Tony Ching**

Cast **Chow Yun-Fat, Emily Chu, Yammie Lam, Dick Wei**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The director** and star of this Hong Kong movie both found huge success soon after. Tony Ching kickstarted a trend with his next effort, *A Chinese Ghost Story*; Chow Yun-Fat became a megastar six months later with *A Better Tomorrow*. *Witch From Nepal* is, er, rather less lauded.

One of several mid–'80s productions to take audiences sightseeing, it visits Nepal, with everyman Joe, who's unaware he's destined to be a Himalayan tribe's next leader. Soon he's being menaced by a baddy who roars like a big cat (Dick Wei), and protected by the titular Sheila (Emily Chu), who's big on impossible leaps and can bend forks Uri Geller-style.

Blending action, fish out of water comedy, coy eroticism (no nipples), and even a dash of zombie horror, it's a simplistic tale. Backstory is dispensed with in a single slide; dialogue is so sparse you may initially wonder if Sheila is mute.

The last 15 minutes, in which Hong Kong's deserted streets become a battlefield, have some amusing touches – at one point Joe wields a traffic light as a weapon! But overall it feels rather undeveloped.

Extras 88 Films regular Frank Djeng supplies a fact-crammed commentary. A talking head (19 minutes) by another expert places the film in context. Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet; postcard. **Ian Berriman**

She soon regretted not packing a coat for Scotland.

SEVEN DEATHS IN THE CAT'S EYE

The Scottish ploy

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 28 JULY

1973 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Antonio Margheriti**

Cast **Jane Birkin, Hiram Keller, Françoise Christophe**

Set in an ersatz Scotland, Antonio Margheriti's gothic take on the giallo has no end of entertaining elements.

Take the setting: Dragonstone Castle, home of the MacGrieff clan, a realm of secret passages and swirling fog where servants mutter, "I dinnae ken!". When a MacGrieff kills a relation, legend goes, the latter becomes a vampire.

Secondly, there are its aesthetic qualities: not just Margerhiti's attractive compositions, but the comeliness of the cast – Jane Birkin has stiff competition here from Hiram Keller, all razorblade cheekbones and Byronic smoulder.

Then there are the absurdities: the fact that as corpses pile up it doesn't make the characters one iota less horny; Birkin's lover Serge Gainsbourg, dubbed as a Scottish inspector; the random inclusion of a gorilla. The mystery is no great shakes (assume the least likely candidate is the killer), but this remains a delicious slice of camp.

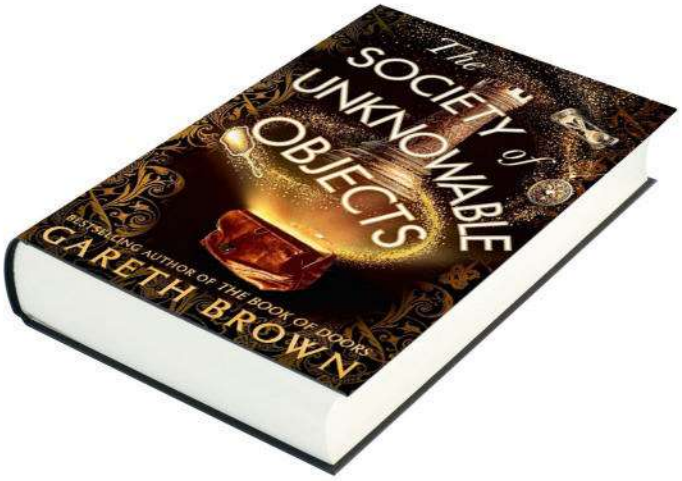
Extras 88 Films' upgrade on their 2016 Blu-ray has plenty of additions. AD Alessandro Perrella (31 minutes) recalls only that the director was "pleasant", though his account of a career that spans dubbing Doris Day and shooting porn inserts remains interesting. In an interview shot at composer Riz Ortolani's villa (26 minutes), his stepson recalls a jovial man. Two visual essays (20/11 minutes) survey Margheriti's '70s output. There's also a trip to the cemetery where Birkin and Gainsbourg were laid to rest (seven minutes), and a new critical commentary.

A second commentary and 11 minutes of Margheriti's son are carried over from the old Blu-ray. Plus: trailers; Italian credits; booklet; art card. **Ian Berriman**

i Actor/model Hiram Keller's father, Hiram K Undercofler, was at the time a justice of Georgia's Supreme Court.

ROUND UP

Time to run down recent theatrical releases now hitting shiny disc. In **DEATH OF A UNICORN** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now), a father and daughter (Paul Rudd and Jenna Ortega) hit a unicorn with their car, then bring the animal to the estate of Richard E Grant's billionaire boss. After he tries to exploit the creature's healing properties, a grisly comeuppance follows... We said: "As a satire, it's rather tame and toothless, while its gory catalogue of skewerings ultimately becomes wearying." Bonuses: commentary by the director, and deleted scenes. In **A MINECRAFT MOVIE** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, out now), Jason Momoa's gamer is transported, Jumanji-style, into the universe of the all-conquering block-building game; there, he and his three companions must strive to find their way out without being eliminated by evil sorceress Malgosha. We said: "Does a decent job at turning a plotless pastime into a colourful, family-friendly spectacle." Extras-wise, you get five featurettes, totalling 56 minutes. Based on the slasher videogame, in which your choices alter the direction of the story, the movie of **UNTIL DAWN** (4K/Blu-ray/DVD, 28 July) takes a different approach, trapping a young woman and her friends in a time loop – with each loop employing a different set of familiar horror tropes. We said: "The time loop gimmick saps the life from this rotting husk, and the teens' ties to one another are too thinly sketched." Bonuses: commentary by the director/a producer; three featurettes; deleted scenes.



THE SOCIETY OF UNKNOWABLE OBJECTS

Eldritch artefacts alert

★★★★☆

RELEASED 7 AUGUST

352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Gareth Brown**

Publisher **Bantam**

Some novels read as if they were hard won. Even before you reach acknowledgments that note how "'difficult second book' phenomenon is real", Gareth Brown's sophomore offering comes across as such a novel. In great part, this is down to the plotting, which seems to jump around so that you're never sure where the story is going to go next.

For the first 100 pages or so, as we're introduced to the book's heroine, Magda Sparks, a member of a four-person-strong secret society devoted to locating magical objects and hiding them away, this is disorientating. Gradually, though, as Brown weaves together different narrative strands, a hugely entertaining fantasy emerges rather than, as you half-fear, a muddle.

It helps that Sparks is good company; sharp, brave and funny – the kind of person who would step forward when bookseller Frank Simpson, the longest-standing member of the Society of Unknowable Objects of the novel's title, and keeper of the Clockwork Cabinet, hears about a previously unknown magical artefact coming to light in Hong Kong.

Cue Sparks jumping on a flight. Her involvement with the society goes from attending meetings in Simpson's basement every few months to a field agent squaring up to a psychopathic professional killer, one of whose first actions in the book is to gun down a young man who Sparks is attracted to.

A thriller writer by trade, Sparks is living the plot of one of her own books – although, as a prologue detailing the death of her mother hints, perhaps her life always was stranger than she realised. Brown is adept at conjuring up a sense of the fantastic existing just off to one side of the everyday.

As for how the plot develops, with new revelations at regular intervals, it's easy to give away spoilers. This much we can say: in Hong Kong, Sparks begins to question what she has been told about magical objects. Has Simpson been less than honest about the society's purpose?

However, as an even bigger threat than being pursued by an assassin emerges, Sparks doesn't have time to mull things over. Out of necessity as much as anything, she gradually morphs into a kind of bibliophile superhero.

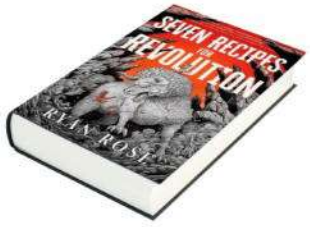
From here, for all that it jumps about in time and space, the book builds to a set-piece that plays out both as a battle between good and evil, and as a warning about the dangers of unintended consequences. Magical artefacts, it's underscored, are dangerous.

> **"Fast-moving fun without insulting your intelligence"**

Not that Brown is offering too much commentary. He is a writer of popular fiction, and *The Society Of Unknowable Objects* more often than not hits the sweet spot where it's fast-moving fun without ever insulting your intelligence. If you're looking for a book to while away the time on holiday, you could certainly do a lot worse.

However, there's maybe too much authorial handwaving in the way Brown allows his characters to get out of scrapes. There's also a nagging sense that a few questions remain unresolved that should have been answered. Then again, you would suppose that a sequel is in the offing, which may just tie this offering to Brown's debut, *The Book Of Doors*. Having battled through, Brown looks set fair for the future. **Jonathan Wright**

i Gareth Brown will be visiting Waterstones in Glasgow, Worcester, Canterbury, Leeds and Durham. More info: bit.ly/gbrowntour.



SEVEN RECIPES FOR REVOLUTION

★★★★☆

RELEASED 22 JULY

480 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ryan Rose**

Publisher **Daphne Press**

It's frustrating how *almost* perfect this fantasy novel is. Its world is distinctive, and the author's prose is vivid and colourful. In short: kaiju exist. Properly farmed and prepared, the meat of these beasts grants superpowers, but access to it is tightly controlled, with workers kept firmly in place. The story simmers with promise (and culinary metaphors), but ultimately lands on your plate a touch underdone.

The story focuses on Paprick, a lowly carver elevated to trainee chef, and ultimately the role of The Butcher, a revolutionary figurehead. Paprick gains entry to the land's posh cooking school, and a pinch of *Harry Potter* is added as he vies to impress the kitchen masters. Despite his low birth, Paprick has natural ability and may be the chosen one the rebellion needs. It's not as clichéd as it sounds, thanks to lush descriptions, well-deployed flashbacks, and a few twists. His family and friends are depicted with vibrancy and affection.

But the narrative loses its savour towards the end. Climactic scenes feel rushed. The villainous king is unconvincing, and the overarching plot is muddled and distant. You close it feeling unsated, wishing the final course had more flavour. That's a shame, because the bulk of the novel is a treat. **Dave Bradley**

AWAKE IN THE FLOATING CITY

★★★★☆

RELEASED **31 JULY**

320 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Susanna Kwan**

Publisher **Simon & Schuster**

If you live in Britain, chances are you're familiar with the feeling that the rain might never go away. But what if it genuinely didn't?

It's been raining non-stop in San Francisco for seven years. While most people have fled the flooded city, the remaining urban residents have climbed steadily upwards, abandoning streets turned to rivers in favour of rooftop markets and walkways between tower blocks. Despite her relocated family's urging, artist Bo clings on in the only home she has ever known, becoming a carer for her neighbour Mia, who is well north of 100 years old.

The notion of the world ending not with a bang, but with rising damp, was recently explored in Julia Armfield's excellent, horror-inflected *Private Rites*, but here the story is elegiac and life-affirming. The relationship between Bo and Mia – both isolated from family, both needing connection – grows in quiet, unpredictable ways, rooted in shared cooking and the odd routines of this makeshift high-rise community.

As the novel goes on, Bo's conflict avoidance gets frustrating, but Mia's memories of her long, trans-Pacific life weave a beautiful patchwork history of San Francisco's Chinatown – ultimately inspiring Bo to create art in tribute to dying woman and dying city alike. **Nic Clarke**

ANGEL DOWN

★★★★☆

RELEASED **29 JULY**

368 pages | **Paperback/ebook**

Author **Daniel Kraus**

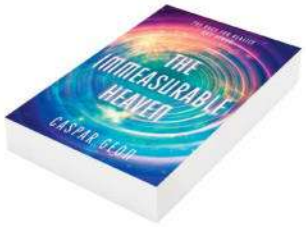
Publisher **Titan Books**

In *Whalefall*, Daniel Kraus threw his structural rulebook into the sea, crafting a uniquely unreliable narrator who was as unsteady in his memories as he was on his feet (though, to be fair, he was standing in a whale's stomach...). In *Angel Down*, Kraus's experimental instincts grow wings and fly, resulting in an entire book told in one breathless sentence.

The story follows Private Cyril Bagger, another potentially untrustworthy type, sent to investigate – and silence – an unnerving scream, which leads him to a wounded and dying angel on the battlefield.

The bigger miracle is that the structure works. Each new paragraph starts with "and", and there isn't a full stop in sight. The radical structure will be divisive, but it will also find plenty of worshippers. It's as immediate and immersive as a one-take movie, constantly moving, cutting our usual reading time by a third.

This isn't to say that you won't be stopped in your tracks. This is a brutal read, mixing gross gore and cynical humour for an unflinching gaze at the (in)human condition. But the characters will carry you through the mud. Bagger is a sublime lead, with Kraus's style making you feel like you're wearing his boots. His fellow soldiers are just as compelling. War might be hell, but *Angel Down* is divine. **Sam Ashurst**



THE IMMEASURABLE HEAVEN

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED **17 JULY**

352 pages | **Paperback/ebook**

Author **Caspar Geon**

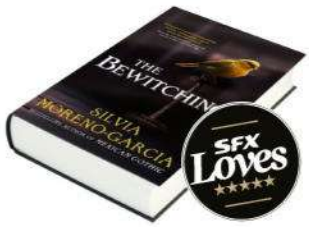
Publisher **Solaris**

Cosmic sci-fi on a canvas broader than eternity (because there's an infinity of alternate realities, too), the rather pretentiously titled *The Immeasurable Heaven* certainly doesn't lack ambition.

In a galactic empire of countless races, the inhabitants have found a way to travel through the multiverse – however, it's a one-way journey. They can only "drop" through dimensions, their lifeforces inhabiting new bodies. But when something announces that it's climbing back out of "The Well", an agent is sent (in the dimensionally transcendental belly of a sentient, organic spacecraft) to intercept and stop it.

The book explodes with crazy ideas, bizarre vignettes and offbeat alien characters. You get the feeling that author Caspar Geon has this universe mapped out in extreme detail. Sadly, he struggles to coherently translate it all onto the page. The book visits so many worlds and realities in a relatively short page count, it ends up feeling like a breathless travelogue. Sentences that seem to want to outlive the heat death of the universe and a gimmicky structure that barely disguises the paucity of plot don't help.

There's some fun to be had, but mostly it feels like a Douglas Adams pastiche with the jokes taken out. **Dave Golder**



THE BEWITCHING

★★★★★

RELEASED **17 JULY**

368 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**

Author **Silvia Moreno-Garcia**

Publisher **Quercus Publishing**

A story about literature nerds *for* literature nerds, Silvia Morena-Garcia's latest chiller is a gloriously creepy tale of black magic and class anxiety in frostiest Massachusetts.

Postgrad student Minerva earned her place at the prestigious Stoneridge University through academic excellence, but she's still working two jobs to make ends meet. She's writing her thesis on little-known horror pioneer Beatrice Tremblay, whose one novel was inspired by the disappearance of her college roommate. So it's a coup when she meets Carolyn Yates, a high-society friend of Tremblay's who lets Minerva study some of the author's personal correspondence. But the deeper Minerva delves, the creepier things get.

Told by three women in different eras, this is a smart novel that wears its influences on its sleeve. "Beatrice Tremblay" isn't real, but if she was, Minerva's copy of *The Vanishing* would sit comfortably on the shelf between Shirley Jackson's *Hangsaman* and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*.

That's where *The Bewitching* should be filed, too, with its bookish protagonist facing the twin horrors of witchcraft and the nouveau riche. The kind of book you'll pick up and immediately lose a whole weekend to, this is dark academia for grown-ups. **Sarah Dobbs**

The Big G gets directions on *King Kong vs Godzilla*.

Puppet wrangling on *Ghidorah, The Three-Headed Monster*.

GODZILLA: THE FIRST 70 YEARS

SFX Loves

Happy birthday Big G

★★★★★

RELEASED 17 JULY
432 pages | **Hardback**
Authors **Steve Ryfle, Ed Godziszewski**
Publisher **Abrams**

It's time to bake a giant cake! But we'll have to devise a recipe that can withstand atomic breath, because it needs transporting to Monster Island. Yes, Gojira is now a septuagenarian.

This "official illustrated history" runs through all the Japanese films and TV series, in order (and yes, that means neither the MonsterVerse series nor the Matthew Broderick heresy are included), from the 1954 original to *Godzilla Minus One*. Early draft scripts are scrutinised; cultural context is supplied (did you know Godzilla's victory dance stemmed from a fad inspired by a comedy manga?). It's a well-written account, which never assumes too much knowledge – a boon for those who like a bit of Big G action but don't know all 33 movies backwards. Brief "Godzilla facts" and boxouts on topics as nerdy as why King Ghidorah's a different colour in some publicity photos provide accessible entry points.

It's lavishly illustrated with full-page stills, and a good number deliver what all right-thinking Gojira fans love most: a shot of a bloke in a rubber suit receiving directorial notes, or waddling around the pool at Toho Studios. Further visual treats include posters and concept sketches.

It's pricey (£55), but worth it considering you're getting a 2.7kg slab of content. An appropriately epic celebration of the world's longest-running film franchise – and the perfect companion to a box set binge watch. **Ian Berriman**

i *King Kong vs Godzilla* (1962) is still the most attended Japanese live-action sci-fi film of all time.

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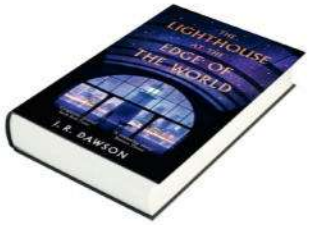


THE LIGHTHOUSE AT THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

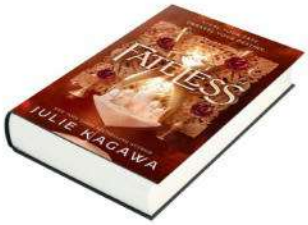
★★★½☆

RELEASED 31 JULY
320 pages | **Hardback/ebook/audiobook**
Author **JR Dawson**
Publisher **Tor**

The pain of grief is a near universal human experience, and every culture has created myths about what happens to us after death. This book draws on the Greek figure of Charon, the ferryman who transports the dead to the underworld, while also incorporating Jewish traditions and Chicago history.

Unable to come to terms with her sister Sam's violent death, Charlie Cooper is left haunted by grief and guilt, and unsupported by her family. She finds herself able to see the souls of the dead who have not yet left the city, but can't find Sam among them. A chance encounter leads her to the Station, a between-space where the lighthouse keeps the dangerous Haunts at bay, and Harosen ferries dead souls across the Veil. His daughter Nera is ready to take his place, but meeting Charlie leads her to feel and follow her own desires for the first time.

The novel captures the hollow aching of grief and yearning of early love, as well as the bitterness and guilt that can accompany loss – and how people wrapped up in pain often say and do awful things. The lighthouse station never feels fully realised, though that does suit its dreamlike constructions. Heartfelt and haunting, but it never quite hits the mark. **Rhian Drinkwater**



FATELESS

★★★½☆

RELEASED 17 JULY

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Julie Kagawa**

Publisher **HQ**

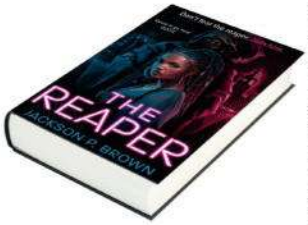
There's something enticing about the idea of a buried city, and it's even better if it's patrolled by zombie skeletons. Yet this subterranean world is only one of *Fateless*'s attractions – its ability to squeeze in so many places, plot twists and set-pieces is why it works so well. While nothing here's particularly new, these familiar ingredients have been successfully baked into a tasty new dish.

Our narrator is thief Sparrow, who performs heists for a powerful group in the city of Kovass – surrounded by deadly deserts and baked in the heat from two suns. When she's given a mission to retrieve a mysterious object from below ground, Sparrow encounters giant bugs, a sexy assassin and a "Deathless King". Oh, and a new destiny.

Julie Kagawa's writing is pacy and fun; she confidently doles out plot twists that other authors might have kept for the final act (or even later books). This speed means you figure out what's going to happen as it happens, rather than guessing chapters ahead and waiting for the characters to catch up.

The world-building is visceral, Sparrow is good company, and certain concepts – such as the ever-present threat of roasting to death when both suns hit high noon – are fascinating. Plus, as we said at the start, you can't beat a zombie skeleton, can you?

Jayne Nelson



THE REAPER

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Jackson P Brown**

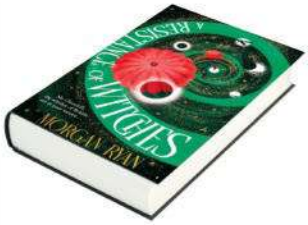
Publisher **Del Rey**

An urban fantasy with the emphasis on urban, *The Reaper* centres on a society of supernatural beings in the dark corners of modern London, as well as an alternate hidden London. These include vampires, werewolves, wraiths, mages, witches, basilisks and a clan of "grim" reapers, who are basically eldritch assassins.

Normally, there's little interaction between humans and the denizens of "London Downstairs". But when Amy, a young woman with the ability to read auras, senses the awakening of a new Reaper, she becomes his unlikely partner, and part of a hunt for two rogue magic-wielding gang leaders.

Jackson P Brown's debut novel is a witty, gory and often delightfully coarse thriller, with elements of *Neverwhere*, *Rivers Of London*, *Hellboy* and even *Harry Potter*. In terms of world-building, there's little earth-shattering originality here, but what the book lacks in innovation it makes up for with atmosphere (London has rarely been so vividly written since Dickens), intriguing characters, and the subtle way Amy's Caribbean heritage gives the story a unique vibe.

You do have to suspend disbelief that a girl like Amy would partner up with, basically, a serial killer, and the "supernatural gangster" plotline is a little workmanlike at times, but this remains a pacy, page-turning start to a new series. **Dave Golder**



A RESISTANCE OF WITCHES

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 17 JULY

416 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Morgan Ryan**

Publisher **Bantam Books**

Yeah, that's not just déjà vu you're feeling. This is a historical fantasy novel about witches searching for a long-lost book with *A ___ Of Witches* in its title – it just isn't the one that's been made into a TV show.

This one is set in the '40s, where the Royal Academy of Witches is assisting Churchill by tracking down magical relics and keeping them out of Nazi hands. The problem is, the Nazis have magic of their own, and not everyone at the Academy is on board with the war effort. When the Grand Mistress is murdered, it's down to her young apprentice to track down the terrifying *Grimorium Bellum* and use its dark magic to win the war before the bad guys can.

As the derivative title suggests, there aren't many surprises here – and not only because we know who won the Second World War. It just doesn't have a lot to say (beyond "Don't be a fascist").

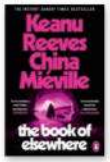
Its one saving grace is how effectively it centres parent-child relationships, biological and otherwise; amid all the wartime horror, it turns out that having someone to look up to, and someone to look out for you, is the most powerful magic of all. In its last few chapters, this book conjures a devastating emotional punch that finally sets it apart from the rest.

Sarah Dobbs

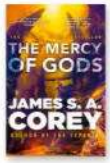
REISSUES

Our pick of the paperbacks this time is Paolo Bacigalupi's fantasy **NAVOLA** (★★★★★, 7 August, Head Of Zeus). Set in a world similar to Renaissance-era Florence, it's centred on the heir to

a powerful banking family, whose father owns a crystalline orb said to be the eye of a long-dead dragon. But is it as inert as it appears? Or does it contain vestiges of power? We said: "Genuinely innovative, a fantasy novel you didn't know you wanted to read." Now, here's an eyebrow-raising team-up: Keanu Reeves and China Miéville! Though technically a spinoff of *BRZRKR*, Reeves's comic series about an immortal warrior known as B, **THE BOOK OF ELSEWHERE** (★★★★☆, 31 July, Del Rey) works as a standalone read. Here, B (who wants



to be able to die) works with a US black ops group. When one of their missions goes pear-shaped, he must grapple with the arrival of another immortal: an enormous, belligerent pig! We said: "Engaging, strange, and has a surprising vein of dark humour." Finally, **THE MERCY OF GODS** (★★★★☆, 5 August, Orbit) is the latest team-up by Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck (under the pen name James SA Corey), creators of The Expanse. After a race of cockroach-like aliens slaughters or enslaves the population of an isolated planet, a



scientist's assistant is taken to their homeworld and set to work. We said: "A superior mainstream SF novel, pacy, filled with big ideas and peopled by characters who demand your attention."

PENDA'S FEN: SCENE BY SCENE

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
362 pages | Paperback
Author **Ian Greaves**
Publisher **Ten Acre Films**

***Penda's Fen* – David** Rudkin's classic *Play For Today*, directed by Alan Clarke – has had a remarkable afterlife. Broadcast in March 1974 and repeated twice since, this hallucinatory story of a teenage boy's political and sexual awakening has cast an eerie spell over several generations of viewers. Despite this, it was hard to get hold of the film until 2016, something which only added to its mystique.

This exhaustive book "reverse-engineers" the film by diving into Rudkin's archives and other paperwork to provide a scene-by-scene commentary. Author Ian Greaves gets into the nitty-gritty of how and where each scene was filmed, while providing a fascinating glimpse at the roads not taken by drawing on seven drafts of Rudkin's screenplay. Various "intermissions" expand on different aspects of the film, such as composer Elgar, censorship, and the cast.

It's a genuinely impressive piece of research, one that now stands as surely the definitive statement on *Penda's Fen*, but what's striking is how mysterious the film remains, despite the meticulous work on display here. The introduction sees the author still trying to nail down an uncertain location, while members of the supporting cast remain unknown. Given the enigmatic nature of Rudkin and Clarke's film, that feels rather fitting. **Will Salmon**

DOCTOR WHO

Four times Fifteen

RELEASED OUT NOW!
256/192/192/176 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Authors **Scott Handcock, Una McCormack, James Goss, Gareth L Powell**
Publisher **BBC Books**

The latest batch of Target novelisations were all penned by people other than the original writer – no surprise given that Russell T Davies had a hand in all four TV episodes (*Rose* was surely a one-off). So what new perspectives do they offer?

In tackling the season one finale for the bumper-sized **Empire Of Death** ★★★½☆, script editor Scott Handcock was well placed to skim different drafts to find bonus material. A prologue where the Doctor sets out to find more Susan Twists (including a trip to Vortis, home of giant ants the Zarbi) is a welcome reinstatement; some zombified civil servants another interesting addition. But he still can't make it seem convincing that an ancient Death God gives tuppence who Ruby's mum is...

Brimming with song titles and nods to *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*, Una McCormack's **The Robot Revolution** ★★★★☆ is the most well-rounded, fleshing out the backstory of Belinda and toxic boyfriend Alan, and showing more of the Doctor's six months on Missbelindachandra One. As a result, the abrupt death of rebel Sasha 55 now hits harder.

With **Lux** ★★★½☆, James Goss takes a similarly playful, format-breaking approach to his *The Giggle* novelisation, making use of cartoonish fonts for living toon Mr Ring-A-Ding, and throwing in the odd visual – when the Doctor and Belinda briefly become animated, it's shown in panels, not described.

> **Expect a rat-a-tat of geeky references**

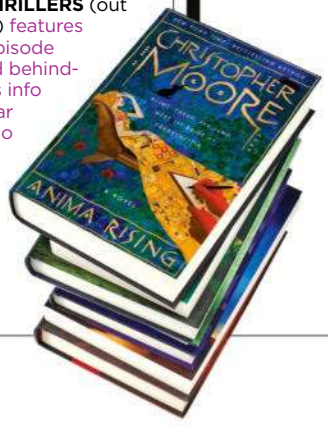
There's also some very pleasing expansion of *Who* fans Lizzie, Hassan and Robyn – expect a rat-a-tat of geeky references.

The most meat-and-potatoes entry is Gareth L Powell's take on "there's a monster behind you" thriller **The Well** ★★★☆☆. To be fair, it's hard to see how you'd open out a story this confined, which in large part consists of people shouting at one another in a single room, but reproducing "personnel files" for anonymous troopers isn't an especially interesting tactic. **Calvin Baxter**

i The cat zapped in "The Robot Revolution" is called Lady Marchmain (after the character in *Brideshead Revisited*).

ALSO OUT

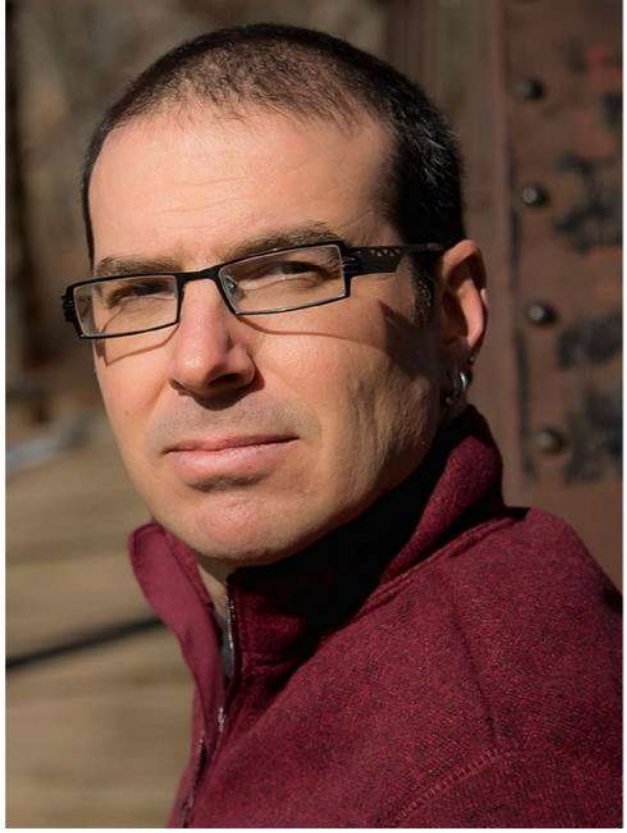
There's plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Set in 1911 Vienna, Christopher Moore's **ANIMA RISING** (out now, William Morrow) sees painter Gustav Klimt finding a woman floating in the Danube canal; she recalls being stranded in the Arctic 100 years ago, and being locked in a crate by one Victor Frankenstein... Caitlin Starling's **THE STARVING SAINTS** (out now, Harper Voyager) follows three women in a besieged medieval castle which descends into bacchanalian madness after divine figures arrive offering help in return for adoration. Expect cannibal gore and sapphic longing. In Leigh Radford's darkly humorous **ONE YELLOW EYE** (17 July, Tor Nightfire), a scientist searches for a cure to a zombie virus. What she's not telling people – as the infected have all been rounded up – is that her undead husband is tied up in her spare room. Nadia Afifi's **A REBEL'S HISTORY OF MARS** (out now, Flame Tree) switches between two timelines, separated by hundreds of years. In one, an aerialist in the Martian circus plots revenge against the oligarch she blames for her parents leaving Earth; in the other, a man joins historians seeking the reason their ancestors left Mars. Pat Cadigan's **ULTRASEVEN** (out now, Titan) adapts the second *Ultraman* series (first aired on Japanese TV in 1967), in which the half-human, half-alien Dan Moroboshi helps defend Earth from extraterrestrial attacks. Finally, Charles Norton's **SERIAL THRILLERS** (out now, Telos) features detailed episode guides and behind-the-scenes info on post-war British radio adventure series, some sci-fi (like *Dan Dare*), others not (like *Dick Barton*).



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Paolo Bacigalupi

He wants to be great, like Elvis without the tassels (© Nickelback)



JT THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY.

What is your daily writing routine like?

I like to sit down early and write about 500 words a day. The practice matters, and the small goal matters. It gets me over the hump of avoidance and procrastination, and the words add up.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music?

Before I got published, I listened to a lot of rock and rap, a lot of it unapologetically about the hunger for success. I recall Nelly's "Grillz", Nickelback's "Rockstar", Fort Minor's "Remember The Name". When you're trying to accomplish something, and you're not sure it's possible, it helps to give yourself permission to have ambition.

Out of all the books you've written, which are you the most proud of?

I really love [2013 children's book] *Zombie Baseball Beatdown*. It was a major departure for me, about kids fighting the zombie apocalypse with their baseball bats and their teamwork skills. Also immigration, food safety regulation, American identity, and meatpacking plants. It was not what my publisher wanted from me, and it's made me the least money of any book I've written, and I'm still glad I did. It's so good.

> **Give yourself permission to have ambition**

Is there anything about one of your books which you wish you could travel back in time and "fix"?

Oh hell no! I'm grateful that I managed to write them at all.

Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?

Criticising the writing in my head, while I'm trying to write.

What would be your desert island book?

A survival manual!

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?

Kelly Link. Holly Black. William Gibson. Janet Morris. Ursula LeGuin. Glen Cook. JG Ballard. George RR Martin. Aldous Huxley. This list could go on and on. All authors have things they do better than I do, and none of us is perfect in all things. The best thing about feeling envious of someone's writing is that it's a signal that you can learn something from them.

What's the biggest misconception people have about being a professional author?

That the highest form of a book is a movie.

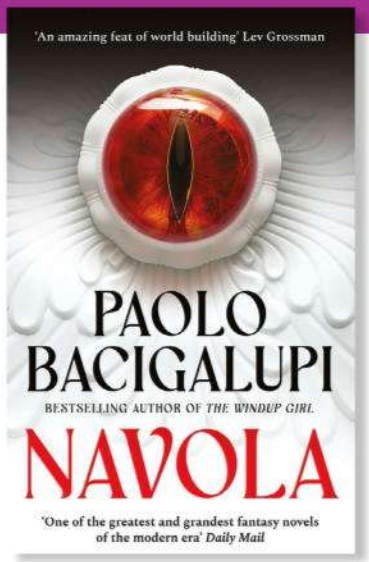
What's the most frustrating thing about being a professional author?

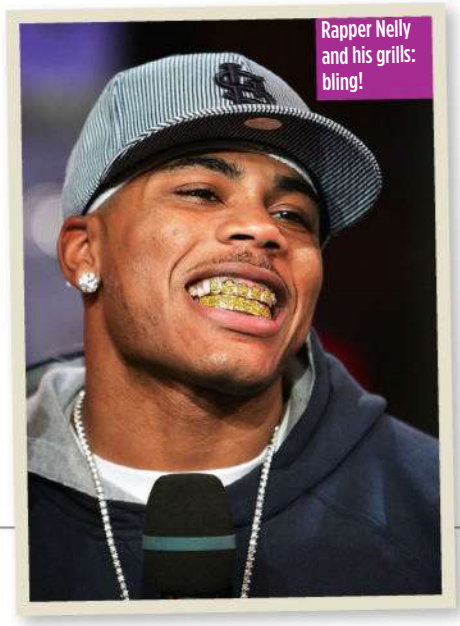
That there's an audience. Which is darkly hilarious to me. I do my best work when I'm entirely inside my own head, so thinking about others reading my work can throw me off. It's something I've been working on.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?

Someone once advised me to fire a previous agent. It changed the trajectory of my entire career. I know writers whose careers have languished because of bad business decisions. This is creative work, but it's also an industry. I had to learn how to navigate that. Learning the craft and writing the books and putting your whole heart into it isn't enough.

Paolo Bacigalupi's Navola is out in paperback on 7 August, published by Head Of Zeus.


'An amazing feat of world building' Lev Grossman
PAOLO BACIGALUPI
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE WINDUP GIRL
NAVOLA
'One of the greatest and grandest fantasy novels of the modern era' Daily Mail



Rapper Nelly and his grills: bling!

SCOTT GRIES/GETTY (1)

ALIENS VS AVENGERS

Adversaries Assemble

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Marvel Comics**

Writer **Jonathan Hickman**

Artist **Esad Ribić**

ISSUES 1-4 **Ever since the sale of** Twentieth Century Fox to Disney became final, the idea of a big "Marvel vs Aliens" confrontation has been inevitable. However, while this new four-issue miniseries features an impressive number of superhero/alien smackdowns, it's also a lot more distinctive than just another crossover packed with shallow fan service.

Having Jonathan Hickman's name on the credits was a major clue that this wasn't going to be a by-the-numbers project, and the most important decision he makes is not just dropping the Avengers into the traditional set-up for an *Alien* movie and expecting us to be impressed.

Instead, the story embraces the idea of the xenomorphs as a civilisation-ending weapon, exploring a violent potential future for the Marvel universe, where most of the human race has been wiped out by a worldwide plague of the biomechanical monstrosities.

Only a small number of survivors – including the ageing remnants of the Avengers – have the chance to escape Earth, but the biggest surprise is that Hickman also tackles the more controversial recent elements of the *Alien* mythos head-on.

With appearances from multiple versions of the android David (all from different universes) and the inscrutable, god-like Engineers, Hickman's story features the kind of heady worldbuilding that's become his hallmark (especially in his acclaimed 2019 revamp of the X-Men). He also pulls off some imaginative twists, from the surprising appearance of the Venom symbiote to the involvement of genetic tinkerer Mister Sinister.

This is backed up by fantastic work from artist Esad Ribić. There's barely anyone else in comics as good at giving action a sense of scale and impact, and his lush visuals bring a luridly pulpy edge to the storytelling.

> **Plenty of big-name characters meet their ends**

However, while the series maintains impressive tension and is consistently gripping, it's also exceptionally grim and bleak. Plenty of big-name characters meet their ends in brutal, tragic circumstances, and the story frequently focuses on the kind of uncomfortable moral quandaries that are normally faced in zombie apocalypses.

Combined with an ambiguous ending and a firm emphasis on the cosmic horror aspect of the *Alien* saga, this is a crossover that's expertly crafted and genuinely impressive, but isn't always a huge amount of fun.

While mileage may vary on Hickman's deeply serious approach, *Aliens Vs Avengers* is still a remarkably ambitious and weird superhero comic that sets a high standard for any further crossovers between these two universes. **Saxon Bullock**

i Before he got his comics break, Esad Ribić worked as an animator on Croatian children's TV like *The Little Flying Bears*.

YAN Vol 1

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Titan Comics**

Writer/artist **Chang Sheng**

GRAPHIC NOVEL **Revenge never** goes out of style, and this new series from Taiwanese writer/artist Chang Sheng gives the traditional revenge thriller an extra dose of kinetic superhero-style action.

It's the story of Yan Tieh Huah, a youthful Peking Opera performer who was framed for the murder of her family 30 years ago. Despite supposedly dying in prison, she's somehow returned, and now wields mysterious powers as she sets out to punish her family's dastardly killers.

A wildly unsubtle story of mystery and ultraviolence, this first 338-page volume features baroque plot twists and a selection of bizarre concepts, alongside lots of over-the-top set-pieces.

It's here where the comic is at its best, with Shen's stylish approach to action echoing classic manga artists like *Crying Freeman*'s Ryoichi Ikegami. The thrilling combat sequences are enhanced by the attention-grabbing character design of Yan herself, resulting in some breathtaking moments of visual storytelling.

It's a pity, then, that the dialogue is so unremittingly bad (it's hard to tell whether a dodgy translation or the quality of the original script is to blame). The resulting whiplash in quality isn't helped by the story throwing in too many random ideas, leaving this opening salvo of *Yan* as a distinctly frustrating and haphazard experience. **Saxon Bullock**

SFX Loves

ASSORTED CRISIS EVENTS

★★★★★

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Deniz Camp**
- Artist **Eric Zawadzki**

ISSUES 1-3 **Deniz Camp is** currently exploring Marvel and DC's alternate universes in *Ultimates* and *Absolute Martian Manhunter*, but his new creator-owned series resembles a different event comic every issue – albeit from a more personal perspective. Like a more phantasmagorical *Astro City* with no superheroes, it examines the devastating impact cosmic occurrences have on ordinary folk.

With each issue self-contained, Camp chucks everything into the heady mix, beginning with #1's *Doctor Who*-esque chronal displacement, which also slyly satirises blockbuster films. While its extra-dimensional dinosaurs evoke *2000 AD*'s "Flesh", #2's futuristic abattoir will surely turn the most dedicated carnivore vegan. Centring on two adjacent towns in parallel dimensions called Hearth-One and Hearth-Two, #3 homages DC's Earth-One and Earth-Two. Its initially wistful tale of immigration and integration soon turns sour in ways sadly all too familiar.

Except for a mysterious figure who appears throughout, there's seemingly little to tie the stories together, but with #4's understated tale of atypical temporal phenomena reprising #1's time theme (volume one concludes with #5), there are signs this enthralling series is coming to a head.

Stephen Jewell

A shimmering mag editor appears from above.

ABSOLUTE GREEN LANTERN

Judgement Day

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Comics**
- Writer **Al Ewing**
- Artist **Jahnoy Lindsay**

ISSUES 1-3 **DC is continuing to** build out its new *Absolute* range, and the latest addition to the roster is also one of the most predictable. A character as high-profile as Green Lantern was a guaranteed arrival, but writer Al Ewing has taken an interestingly left-field approach, turning this into a tale of brooding sci-fi horror.

The first three issues use a flashback-heavy structure to show what happens to friends Hal Jordan and Jo Mullein when their quiet hometown is trapped in a forcefield by a sinister alien entity determined to judge everybody.

Both characters are going to end up transformed by what happens – "present day" sequences show that Hal now possesses a deadly power he can't control – and Ewing does a great job of establishing the characters, setting up a conflict between the two protagonists with lots of potential.

He also shows that this is going to be a *very* different take on the classic *Lantern* mythos – this initial story arc feeling surprisingly reminiscent of the opening of classic horror/action *Preacher*.

This change in setting and mood is emphasised by Jahnoy Lindsay's characterful, manga-influenced artwork. The result is a slow-burning thriller with impactful moments of sudden violence and pulpy weirdness.

While the mystery starts to feel a *little* drawn out by the end of the third issue, this is still a satisfying take on *Green Lantern* that looks to be maintaining the impressively high standard of its fellow *Absolute Universe* comics.

Saxon Bullock

i The initial pitch was more "Hal Jordan's book", but Ewing later decided he wanted the more "action-driven" Jo to be central.

UNIVERSAL MONSTERS: THE MUMMY

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer/Artist **Faith Erin Hicks**

ISSUES 1-4 **Doomy romance is** one of the hallmarks of the classic Universal Monsters, and this latest modern-day revamp delivers it in spades thanks to some strong storytelling choices from writer/artist Faith Erin Hicks.

This four-issue miniseries is set in early 20th century Egypt and follows Helen, who finds herself stuck between the worlds of her British father and Egyptian mother.

She discovers that the spirit of a long-dead Egyptian priestess has been reborn inside her, placing her in danger. The priestess's cursed lover Imhotep has been revived as an undead monstrosity, stopping at nothing to reunite with her.

While this new take on *The Mummy* doesn't fully embrace horror until its final issue, this is an intelligently crafted adaptation of the original 1932 movie. The story adds new and interesting themes but never loses sight of the haunting relationship at its core.

Hicks also puts just as much emphasis on the strange friendship that evolves between Helen and the priestess, while her expressive art gives the story plenty of atmosphere. Fans of the later, action-heavy *Mummy* movies may not appreciate the gentler approach of this series, but it's still a well-crafted adaptation that packs a surprising emotional punch. **Saxon Bullock**

DUNE: AWAKENING

Lacking in spice

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PC**

Publisher **Funcom**

VIDEOGAME **Dashing between the** ever-approaching gullets of sandworms and sparse rocky outcrops, *Dune: Awakening* is a world where it's hard to survive. Draining blood from your enemies to process into water, robbing fallen spaceships that spilt their guts across the sands, and jetting around on a sandbike all sounds like great fun, and sometimes it is.

Yet sometimes it's also extraordinarily boring. As survival games go, *Dune: Awakening* is strong enough at a base level. Creating your hideout is a great and creative exercise, but the other aspects of the game have inherited the plodding pace of the *Dune* franchise at large.

The first few hours, where the game should hook you entirely, are largely extremely dull. It's just the player, sand and rocks. You'll mine granite and then wander off into the desert, doing your best to avoid what seems to be largely random death by sandworm.

Walking across the desert, as you'll have to do for several hours, is an exercise in tedium and frustration, like *Death Stranding* without the Kojima charm. The story feels like window dressing, and it's not until you build a sandbike, around six hours into the game, that the survival game treadmill of "explore, harvest, build, repeat" really kicks in. This is all fine and dandy until you get more complex recipes that require an ungodly amount of water and ore to build, which necessitates huge amounts of grind.

Playing with a group will likely alleviate these concerns somewhat, but if you're solo, it'll be a struggle. Tools are also a problem: there are far too many of them, meaning you'll never be able to do everything you want to in a single trip out into the wastes.

Despite these issues, there is the core of a strong game here, particularly for *Dune* fans. The sense of being in Frank Herbert's universe is sensational. The map is huge, Sardaukar patrols hover overhead, and you need to avoid dehydration and heatstroke. Arrakis feels as deadly and dangerous as the books and films describe it. Those who love *Dune* will likely be able to look past the frustrations. But if you have only a passing interest, *Awakening* likely won't be for you.

Joe Chivers

i Hagga Basin's Eastern Shield Wall region has a rock formation that looks like Godzilla. You can climb up into the mouth.

Visit Arrakis! It's got sand. And worms. And, er...

THE ALTERS

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PC**

Also on **PS 5, Xbox Series X|S**

Publisher **11 bit studios**

VIDEOGAME **As the sole** survivor of a crash-landed space expedition, Jan Dolski's day is only going to get worse. Arriving at the mission's wheel-shaped base, he discovers that the station is about to be engulfed in an intense radiation wave emitted by the planet's sun. He can't pilot the ship without a crew, so with death on the horizon, Jan is forced to clone himself.

What follows is a cascade of calamities you need to endure together with your crew of "you"s. Survival means traversing the planet's dramatic landscape and extracting resources from its surface using a tactile toolkit of gadgets. These resources then feed a sleek management system where you can effortlessly tinker with your output, allowing you to react swiftly to any incoming crisis.

Then there are your alters, who aren't just clones, but independent characters with diverging characteristics and skills from Jan's multiple timelines of different life decisions. Many of the game's choices don't just concern survival, but how you handle the labour conditions and clashing personalities of your crew, for better or worse.

The result is a game that finds the humanity in a genre rooted in indifferent management systems. *The Alters* asks an important question: in the fierce fight for survival, what are you willing to sacrifice? **Rachel Watts**

DOCTOR WHO: VAMPIRE WEEKEND

The truth sucks

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **71 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **The first in Big** Finish's new Thirteenth Doctor range picks things up at a time when Graham and Ryan have left the TARDIS, leaving Yaz the Doctor's only companion – with the now standard home-life interludes. Tim Foley's *Vampire Weekend* is set during one of these, as Yaz joins a group of friends for a hen weekend at a large, isolated manor house in the Peak District.

The lack of imagery means it's all too easy to picture this as a classic Transylvanian castle, as the group are trapped inside the grounds and find themselves picked off one by one, left unconscious with suspicious wounds on their necks... It's not long before the Doctor turns up, complete with chickens Ian and Barbara (having apparently misunderstood "hen do"...), and explains the villain is a "truth vampire", one of the Time Lords' ancient enemies that she's been chasing. Oh, and it could also look like any one of the gang.

Vampire Weekend plays somewhere between a classic murder mystery and a slasher film, as the group slowly falls to the truth vampire (if not given an antidote to its bite in time, they will turn into one) and paranoia grows between the remaining members. It's well realised, leaving you feeling genuinely disquieted and uncertain who to trust – are even the Doctor or Yaz who they seem?

There are some neat character beats too, as Yaz realises how much of her friends' lives she's missed, and they reaffirm her importance to them. It's just a shame that mother of the bride "Gina's mum" (never properly named) strays so close to caricature as she fusses over her yappy dog Boo-boo. And the truth vampires, whose bite acts (briefly) as a truth serum, feel a step too far into the ridiculous.

These are small quibbles, though, about a fun, character-driven whodunnit that reunites two women who never really got enough time together.

Rhian Drinkwater

ℹ The band Vampire Weekend took the name from a *The Lost Boys*-y short film that singer Ezra Koenig started but never finished.

2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY

You Can Call Me HAL

★★★½☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Number of players **3-5**
- Publisher **Maestro Media**

BOARD GAME **Based on the classic** Stanley Kubrick film, and suitable for ages 10 and upwards, *2001: A Space Odyssey – The Board Game* sees up to four players take on the roles of Discovery One crew mates as they attempt to outwit HAL, the spacecraft's dangerous computer. But HAL isn't actually an AI this time around, as the game requires one player to slip into his processors to try to outwit the rest.

It's a race against time. Can HAL manage to shut down three systems, or life support, before the others manage to use three logic sequences in his core? Crew members can move around the ship, sharing different cards with each other as they do, but there's a twist: all information is public, and no cards can be shown to another crew member first. So if you want to talk strategy, you have to do it in full view (and hearing) of HAL.

The player in the hot seat also gets to take an additional turn after every crew member, and several turns at the start of the game before the humans realise what's going on, all while playing a card each turn. Half of HAL's hand of cards is also revealed, so the crew has some idea what it's capable of – which can also lull them into a false sense of security.

> **"While it seems complicated at first, it's quick to play"**

While it seems complicated at first thanks to a bunch of tokens, pieces and rules, *2001: A Space Odyssey* is actually quick to play. In less than 30 minutes, your reviewer killed the entire crew on their first go, thanks to a lucky draw. Sorry, Dave.

Rollin Bishop

ℹ In Arthur C Clarke's first draft of his story, the AI was called Socrates, and was "roughly the size and shape of a man".

NOVEMBER 1977

SFX's time machine hurls us back to a random month once again

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

Spielberg's apprentice was out of this world.

FLASHBACK

Mash Hit

16 NOVEMBER 1977 If *Star Wars* launched the great SF boom of the late '70s, then *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* consolidated it as a cultural phenomenon.

Steven Spielberg's dazzling, awestruck fable was conceived as a very different kind of first contact tale. Inspired by the Watergate scandal, the budding movie brat planned an edgier, more conspiracy-led take on UFOlogy, more in line with jaundiced political thrillers like *The Parallax View*. *Taxi Driver*'s Paul Schrader took a stab at a screenplay before Spielberg reconsidered the story, exchanging governmental intrigue for everyman experience. "Ordinary family, extraordinary situation," as producer Michael Phillips put it.

On release, the film's essentially feelgood message wrongfooted many. Spielberg had defined cinematic suspense with *Jaws* – surely he was back to make the boundless night sky as terrifying as the wide open ocean?

Initial marketing fed this expectation. A promo clip of three-year-old Barry Guiler's abduction from the family home anticipated the chilling supernatural mischief of 1982's *Poltergeist*. Without explanation, the title itself has an eerie, inscrutable vibe. Even the iconic poster suggests a sense of foreboding: a starlit road, running to a distant blaze of light that could just as easily be oblivion as wonder.

But Spielberg was an optimist at heart. "I didn't look up at the sky thinking there was bad out there," said the man who remembered watching meteors streak above New Jersey as a kid. "I guess I was brought up to believe that a civilisation of higher intelligence would only travel this distance to explore and discover and not annihilate and eradicate."

Close Encounters was a hit, but its creator wasn't satisfied. In 1980, the Special Edition took us inside the mothership. Come 1998, the Director's Cut pretended that had never happened, among further tweaks. Spielberg's next film, *Disclosure*, is set to be yet another extraterrestrial encounter. The man who once marvelled at falling meteors is clearly still as obsessed as Roy Neary, mash-sculpting hero of his 1977 masterpiece.

His attempts to replicate *Blue Peter*'s Tracy Island got out of hand.

Steve McQueen was approached to play Neary, along with Jack Nicholson, James Caan and Gene Hackman.

CPC/THA/COLUMBIA/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

© A&M RECORDS

Space Karen

13 NOVEMBER 1977 From Meco's disco-friendly take on the *Star Wars* theme to Space's pulsatingly futuristic "Magic Fly", there was a distinct touch of the cosmic to the UK singles chart in autumn 1977.

Spookily in sync with the Stateside release of *Close Encounters* was "Calling Occupants Of Interplanetary Craft" by the Carpenters. Peaking at number nine in the British chart in the week of 6-12 November, this was an open-hearted, lushly orchestrated cover of a track by Canadian prog rockers Klaatu – named after the interplanetary ambassador in 1951's *The Day The Earth Stood Still*.

Billed as The Recognised Anthem Of World Contact Day, the song was inspired by the real-life International Flying Saucer Bureau, who in 1953 asked their members to participate in a collective telepathic experiment, thought-beaming a message of goodwill to the stars. The title is taken from that original message, as is the lyrical refrain "We are your friends". And who wouldn't want to be friends with Karen Carpenter?

Boasting over 160 musicians, this paean to interstellar harmony is one of pop's most maximal moments. Along with a full choir, the track features the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra – billed as the Overbudget Philharmonic for contractual reasons.

The success of *Star Wars* prompted the release of the single, edited down from the seven-minute album version. The American picture sleeve (see above) was by illustrator and concept artist Andrew Probert, who contributed to the design of the Enterprises in both *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and *The Next Generation*.

The Carpenters performed the song on their *Space Encounters* TV special in May 1978, a smiley, cornball extravaganza that makes the *Star Wars Holiday Special* look like Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. "It just shows you that people are people," reflected Karen. "Some are from outer space... and some are spaced out!"

UNIVERSAL TV/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Gamma radiation: side effects include very bushy eyebrows.

Anger Management

4 NOVEMBER 1977 Networked this month stateside, the two-hour TV movie of *The Incredible Hulk* marked a new approach to small-screen superheroics, closer to sober adult drama than the primary-coloured comic strip tone of *Batman* or *Wonder Woman*.

"I don't deal with people in spandex," declared creator Kenneth Johnson, who claimed to find more inspiration in the works of Victor Hugo and Robert Louis Stevenson than Stan Lee and Jack Kirby.

Johnson retooled the Hulk's origin story, replacing the Gamma bomb, desert backdrop and freaky Soviet foe the Gargoyle with a subtler, more tragic tale of a scientist searching for a way to unlock the hidden strength that all humans possess.

"I believe that, in the long run, the original movie itself will become a classic – a television classic," said star Bill Bixby, who shared the shredded shirts with Lou Ferrigno, a bodybuilder recommended to Johnson by none other than Arnold Schwarzenegger.

PETER BISCHOFF/GETTY

ABBA, with Wings waiting in the... well...

IN REAL LIFE

- **Prime Minister:** James Callaghan
- **US President:** Jimmy Carter
- **In the charts:** ABBA's "Name Of The Game" dominates, eventually deposed by Wings' "Mull Of Kintyre".
- **In the news:** British Airways launches regular supersonic Concorde flights between London and New York; UK firefighters go on their first ever national strike; Princess Anne gives birth to a son, Peter, making the Queen a grandmother for the first time (gawd bless yer, ma'am etc).

ON THE SHELF

- Lindsay Wagner's Bionic Woman not only fronts the 19 November edition of "junior *TV Times*" *Look-In*, but stars in the debut instalment of her own comic strip, drawn by John M Burns.

© ITV

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

WESTERNS

Put on a ten-gallon hat and saddle up as we explore sci-fi and fantasy takes on the Wild West. Yee-ha!

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 1
In *Back To The Future Part III*, what alias does Marty McFly use in the year 1885?

QUESTION 2
Name Charles G Finney's acclaimed fantasy western novel, first published in 1935.

QUESTION 3
In which *Star Trek* episode do Kirk, Spock, Scott, McCoy and Chekov find themselves recreating the events of the Gunfight at the OK Corral?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
What's the title of this *Doctor Who* episode?

QUESTION 5
Which Hammer Films production was described on posters as "The first moon 'western'"?

QUESTION 6
Name the singing cowboy who discovered an underground kingdom in the 1935 serial *The Phantom Empire*.

QUESTION 7
In the TV series *Wynonna Earp*, what relation is the titular character to lawman Wyatt Earp?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
In which film would you find this gunslinger?

QUESTION 9
Which TV series are you watching if you hear someone singing "Take my love/Take my land/Take me where I cannot stand..."?

QUESTION 10
The 1980 film *Battle Beyond The Stars* is essentially a sci-fi spin on which classic Western?

QUESTION 11
Which '80s cartoon series is set in the 23rd century, on a planet called New Texas?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Supply the title that's been removed from this movie poster.

QUESTION 13
Name the scar-faced bounty hunter who first appeared in a 1972 issue of the comic *All-Star Western*.

QUESTION 14
In the 1966 film *Billy The Kid vs Dracula*, which horror movie regular played Dracula?

QUESTION 15
Which Secret Service character connects Robert Conrad and Will Smith?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this *Doctor Who* story.

QUESTION 17
Which western videogame has a zombie-themed expansion called *Undead Nightmare*?

QUESTION 18
Name the Gerry Anderson puppet series which featured a sheriff voiced by Nicholas Parsons.

QUESTION 19
Which famous outlaw do Bill and Ted befriend in *Bill And Ted's Excellent Adventure*?

QUESTION 20
Name the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode in which Worf, his son, and Troi become trapped in a Western-themed holodeck adventure.

Answers

1 Clint Eastwood 2 *The Circus Of Dr Lao* 3 "Spectre Of The Gun" 4 "A Town Called Mercy" 5 *Moon Zero Two* 6 Gene Autry 7 Great-great-granddaughter 8 *Westworld* 9 *Firefly* 10 *The Magnificent Seven* 11 *BraveStarr* 12 *Cowboys & Aliens* 13 Jonah Hex 14 John Carradine 15 James West (in *The Wild Wild West/Wild Wild West*) 16 "The Gunfighters" 17 *Red Dead Redemption* 18 *Four Feather Falls* 19 Billy the Kid 20 "A Fistful Of Datas"

How did you do?

How deadly a gunslinger are you?

0-5
The Milky Bar Kid

6-10
Peter "Painless" Potter

11-15
The Waco Kid

16-19
Shane

20
The Man With No Name

PICTURES: BBC, UNIVERSAL PICTURES/DREAMWORKS, HA/THA/SHUTTERSTOCK

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NETFLIX

All contents are subject to change, like the lineup of The Addams Family.

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy

Was this the strangest end to a TV series of all time?

The Prisoner "Fall Out"

Saxon Bullock, freelance writer

It was the killer balloon that stuck with me. Watching cult '60s TV classic *The Prisoner* at six years old (via an early '80s Sunday morning re-run), it was hard not to be terrified by the show's amorphous, inexplicable entity called "Rover". However, there were other, stranger images that also lingered, and led to me becoming obsessed with the series in my teens – especially the final episode.

All I could initially remember of "Fall Out" was lots of underground action, a guy in a judge's wig yelling, and *Rumpole Of The Bailey* star Leo McKern monologuing at a rocket.

Later on, I discovered its reputation as "the *really* weird one", and that creator/lead actor Patrick McGoohan, who'd wielded his then-superstar status for almost complete creative control, wrote the episode in a frenzied rush across 36 hours in order to fill out the show's original 17-episode order.

However, it was only when I finally acquired the finale – via a single-episode VHS release – that I understood what a genuinely *demented* piece of television "Fall Out" is. Directed by McGoohan, it's a mic-drop of a conclusion that still stands as one of the most aggressively strange TV episodes ever broadcast.

The Prisoner began as an allegorical pop-art thriller about an ex-secret agent only known as Number Six (McGoohan) trying to escape "The Village", a cheerful resort/prison, but had already gone in startlingly bizarre directions.

The finale pushes things further, literally blowing up the show's premise as Number Six "wins", confronts the mysterious Number One (who turns out – once two different masks have been pulled off – to be a robed, cackling version of McGoohan himself) and escapes the Village.

It's a surreal, borderline-abstract fever dream with frenetic editing, experimental acting, lots of singing of the old spiritual "Dem Bones", and an action-packed climax where guards are machine-gunned to the sound of "All You Need Is Love" by the Beatles.

Most of all, it's an episode that exists purely to avoid answers, and deny the viewer any closure. McGoohan foregrounds the show's exploration of individuality and rebellion, then throws all the thematic jigsaw pieces in the air and says "Work it out yourself."

In today's era of familiar IP and safe bets, we could do with a few more series finales as weird and uncompromising as this. ●

Saxon has gloriously vindicated the right of the individual to be individual.

Fact Attack!

- As a cost-saving measure, all the sets were reused from the most recently made episode of *The Prisoner*, "The Girl Who Was Death".
- Kenneth Griffith, who played the Judge, wrote his own speech, after McGoohan told him, "I haven't got time."
- The version of Number Six's Lotus 7 roadster seen in "Fall Out" is a duplicate, as the original car (used in the title sequence) had been sold.
- The "Lageau & Son" estate agent's sign on Number Six's house is an in-joke referencing the episode's set dresser, John Lageau.
- The morning after broadcast, the switchboard of ATV (who financed *The Prisoner*) was jammed by viewers calling to complain.

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